

Written by
Rifujin na
Magonote

Illustrated by
Shirotaka

NOVEL
7

Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation



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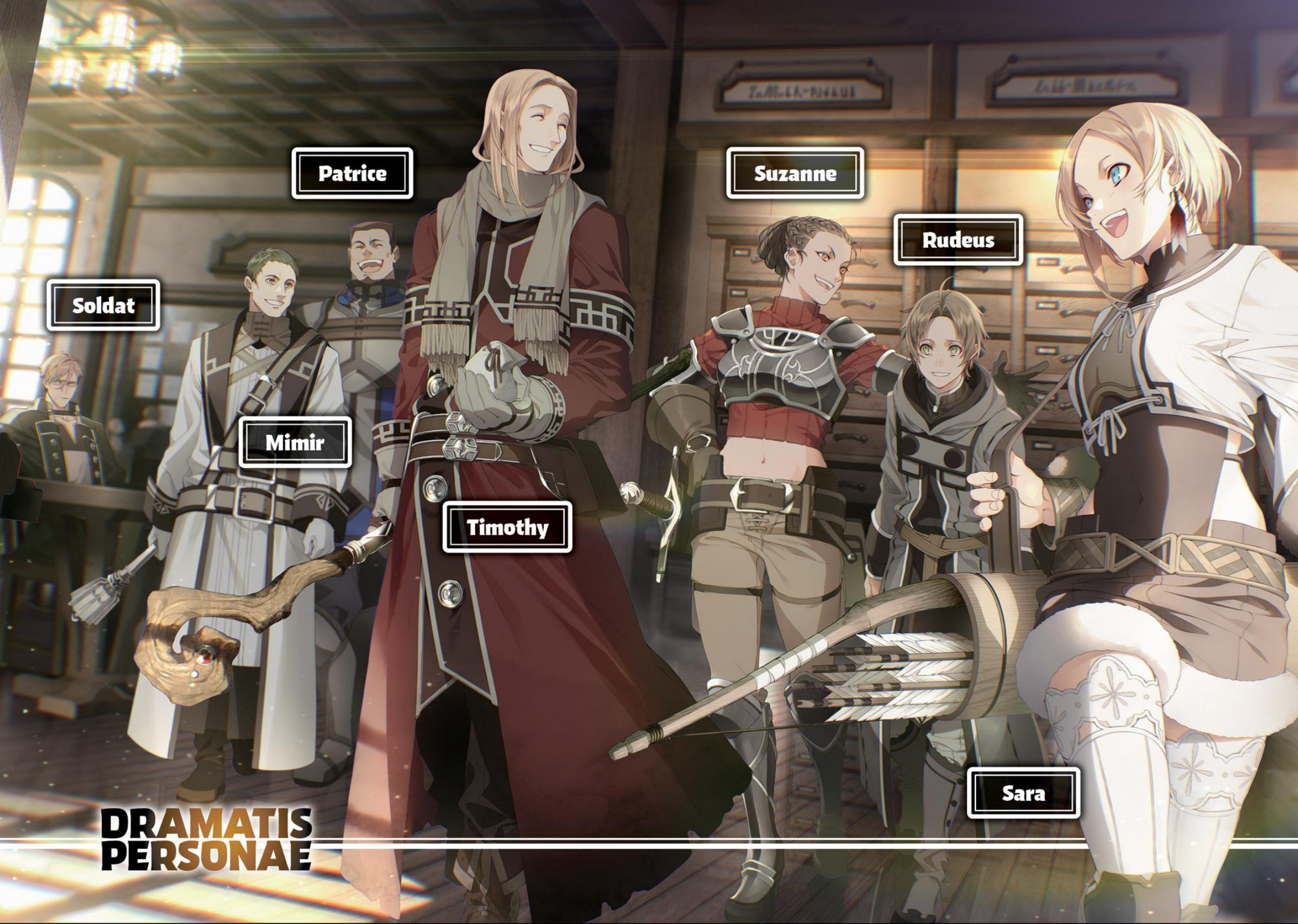
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Rifujin na
Magonote

ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka



Patrice

Suzanne

Rudeus

Soldat

Mimir

Timothy

Sara

**DRAMATIS
PERSONAE**

“Hmm,
maybe this?
Or this...
I wonder
which one I
should pick.
Which do
you think,
Rudeus?”



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Magonote

ILLUSTRATED BY
Shirotaka



Seven Seas Entertainment

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TRANSLATION: Paul Cuneo, Alyssa Orton-Niioka
ADAPTATION: JY Yang
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Dayna Abel, Stephanie Cohen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
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*"Dancing in front of a woman is one thing.
But I'd prefer to avoid dancing in the palm
of her hand."*

—At the end of the day, two-dimensional
girls are just superior.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT

TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Prologue

Three carriages rattled down a narrow road, surrounded by a dense, dark wood.

This was the Wurm's Whiskers, a forest that separated the Kingdom of Asura's northern border from the valley known as the Red Wurm's Upper Jaw. The Upper Jaw was a natural chokepoint, but unlike its counterpart—the Lower Jaw—far to the south, it was located several days' travel from the Asuran border.

There was a good reason for this, of course: The forest between the border and the valley was infested with monsters. Many years ago, the Kingdom of Asura built a wall to the south in order to keep those creatures from wandering into its territory, a measure that dramatically reduced its spending on monster extermination. Largely neglected, the forest remained home to vicious monsters...as well as bandits and criminals who'd fled Asuran territory. Few were eager to risk a journey through it. Still, some hardy merchants did push their way to the Northern Territories and back in pursuit of profit.

The leader of this small caravan was one such man. He was a trader by the name of Bruno, an up-and-coming merchant who'd made something of a name for himself in the last year, and had only just joined a major Asuran trading company. Bruno's current task was to bring two carriages stuffed with goods from the Kingdom of Asura to the Northern Territories. This was a sizable, valuable shipment. Losing it would mean the end of his career, and possibly his life. There was a good chance he'd face attacks from monsters, bandits, or both.

Before joining his current company, Bruno had been a simple traveling merchant, accountable to no one but himself. In those days, he'd relied on his own sword and instincts to protect his cargo. But now that he'd come up in the world, he was facing far greater

dangers and much more serious consequences for failure. He could no longer do everything by himself.

Fortunately, he *could* afford the services of professional guards.

The third carriage in Bruno's caravan was occupied by a group of adventurers he'd hired to defend it, in addition to a handful of paid passengers.

The guards were the five members of the B-ranked party Counter Arrow, which had been active in the Kingdom of Asura for some time. The passengers numbered three: two swordsmen-in-training heading north to hone their skills, and one gloomy young magician in a dark gray robe. While they weren't technically guards, Bruno expected they'd fight to defend the caravan if necessary, given that their lives would be on the line.

Incidentally, the gloomy young magician went by the name Rudeus Greyrat. At that moment, he was in the back of the swaying carriage, blankly looking skyward. He had eyes like a dead fish and his mouth hung half open. He wasn't sitting so much as he was slumped against the wall.

The boy was totally hollow. There was nothing but a void within him. When you glanced at his miserable face, you could almost hear his thoughts out loud:

Everything's meaningless. What's the point of being alive? Why do any of us even bother?

I don't know. The only thing I know is that I'm empty inside.

I'm nothingness. I'm zero. I'm the Heart of Space...

The boy let out a weak, lifeless sigh.

Thanks entirely to his presence, the carriage felt about as cheerful as a morgue. "You've been doing a lot of sighing lately, kid," said one of the boy's fellow passengers. "What's the matter?"

The woman who'd spoken, a member of the B-ranked party Counter Arrow, was dark-skinned with dreadlocks pulled into a bun. She wore a chest protector and gauntlets—relatively light armor, but a bit more than what a typical swordswoman would go for. Her professional class was most likely a Warrior.

The young magician slowly looked at her and tried his best to smile. It only served to startle her. The boy might have intended it to be a friendly smile, but there was no emotion in it whatsoever. It was like the eerie grin of a wax statue. "I'm sorry; was I sighing? Don't worry about it, miss. I'm just fine."

He'd spoken loudly and energetically, but his eyes were still lifeless and his expression was still gloomy. It was obvious that he wanted to be left alone.

The warrior wasn't about to give up. "Okay, then. So why are you heading up north, anyway?" She'd half expected the young magician to ignore her completely. With that in mind, getting any response at all was a decent start. "Huh? Uh, does that...really matter, miss?"

"I mean, I'm guessing you're a magician, but you haven't even come of age yet, right? Did you just graduate from some academy? If you're looking for adventure, I'd start somewhere a little safer than the Northern Territories."

This gloomy magician did look young, to be fair. He might have been twelve, or perhaps thirteen—almost a child, really. Before responding, he made another attempt at a smile. It didn't go any better than before. "Sorry, but is there a reason I need to answer any of these questions?"

His reply amounted to a blunt refusal to participate in the conversation. This young man clearly had no interest at all in chatting. Evidently, he wanted to wallow in his misery until the carriage reached its destination.

Some might have found his attitude unpleasant. Still, at the end of the day, this was a conversation between travelers. The boy's tone could have been more polite, yes; but there was an unspoken rule that you shouldn't get too nosy with people you met on the road. When you got rejected this explicitly, the normal thing to do was shrug your shoulders and drop the subject.

Which was, in fact, exactly what the woman with the dreadlocks did. But the adventurer seated by her side reacted very differently. "Okay, what is your problem?! Suzanne was just trying to be nice!"

For some reason, the girl was glaring furiously at Rudeus. At a glance, she looked like a strong-willed sort, blond-haired and lightly armored like a swordswoman, but she didn't wear a blade. A bow was slung across her back instead. She was perhaps fifteen or so— young for an adventurer, even if older than the boy magician. It was likely she didn't fully understand the customs that applied in this situation.

Rudeus turned toward the girl and studied her face closely for a moment, then caught himself and jerked his eyes away.

"Calm down, Sara. It's not like he's trying to pick a fight or anything. He was just a little blunt, that's all."

"But you've been worrying about him since yesterday, Suzanne! You said he looked sort of depressed, right? And now he's acting like you're harassing him or something..."

So the woman with the dreadlocks was Suzanne, and the younger girl was Sara. While the boy had averted his eyes, he wasn't entirely disinterested in their conversation, judging from the way he kept shooting small glances at them. His smile had given way to a melancholy expression. It was hard to tell what he might be thinking.

After a few seconds, he spoke again. Just as before, his voice was loud and clear, but somehow less than reassuring. "Um, I'm

heading north to look for my mother. She's been missing since the Fittoa Displacement Incident."

"Oh..."

"Fittoa, huh...?"

The two adventurers looked apologetic.

The magical calamity in Fittoa had been a shocking event for the citizens of Asura. Neither Suzanne nor Sara were from the region, but their party had done work there assisting in the recovery effort, and they'd encountered displaced refugees in many different cities during their travels. This young magician's gloomy expression was the same one they'd seen on those people's faces. It was the expression of someone who'd experienced a crushing loss.

Suzanne didn't say anything out loud, but from the look on her face, it was obvious she felt bad about having pried. "Okay, I get it...but that doesn't mean you have to be rude..." She still didn't seem entirely satisfied, but the boy ignored her grumbling and turned away, expecting that he'd now be left in peace.

The atmosphere in the carriage had only grown heavier. The two other swordsmen squirmed a little in their seats, uncomfortable expressions on their faces.

"How are you planning to search for her, though? The Northern Territories are huge." To everyone's surprise, Suzanne chose to press forward. She knew the young magician was going to find this annoying, but she didn't want to spend the rest of this trip sitting around in awkward, dreary silence.

Exasperation flashed across the boy's face, but he put on another artificial smile and turned back toward Suzanne. "...Yes, I suppose you're right. I'll just have to take it one step at a time."

"Okay, but do you have any idea where to start? Some sort of lead, or someone you know up there? Traveling alone isn't easy, you know?"

“ ... ”

What thoughts were running through the boy's head in this moment? Perhaps something like *Is she going to keep talking to me for the rest of this trip?* Or perhaps *I don't really want this to drag on much longer. But if I shoot her down again, that girl might get angry at me.*

“If you want, I could give you a quick primer on the Northern Territories. Better to know a few things about the place than nothing at all, right?”

The boy hesitated for a moment, then let out a little sigh. “Um, sure. Please do.” His expression didn't suggest any interest or curiosity whatsoever.

Suzanne, apparently, was fine with that. She chose to take his answer at face value. “All right, then. Pick the wax out of your ears and listen up, kid.”

“The Northern Territories” was the name most people used when referring to the northern region of the Central Continent. For the most part, it was a harsh land. Things weren't quite as desolate as in the Demon Continent, but since snow covered the ground for one-third of each year, it was difficult to grow crops. Food was far from plentiful. The majority of the nations in this region were poor and weak, and often fought over scraps of resources while their citizens eked out meager existences. There were many monsters as well, and most of them were far stronger than those found in the Kingdom of Asura. This attracted warriors-in-training and veteran adventurers to the area, but that wasn't enough to make the region even close to prosperous.

However, there were a handful of countries that managed to flourish even in this difficult environment. These were the states referred to as the “Magic Nations”:

The Kingdom of Ranoa, known for its institutions of magical learning.

The Duchy of Neris, known for its manufacturing of magical implements.

Finally, the Duchy of Basherant, known for its expertise in arcane research.

These three countries had formed a tight alliance, pooled their collective magical knowledge, and attained a dominant position in the region.

After reaching Rank B as adventurers, Suzanne and her party had more or less run out of jobs down in Asura. They were moving north to re-establish themselves in the Magic Nations. And, as it happened, Rudeus Greyrat was headed in the same direction.

Not that he'd bothered to choose a specific destination.

Chapter 1: The Brokenhearted Magician

The city of Rosenberg, located a two months' journey north of the Asuran border, was sometimes called the "Gateway to the Northern Territories." If it wasn't the single largest city in the Duchy of Basherant, it was a close second. The export of magical implements from there to Asura provided more than half of the entire country's revenue.

"So this is the place..."

I stepped out of the carriage and paused to take a look around. The sky above me was completely covered in white clouds; the streets were bustling with adventurers and merchants, all of whom seemed to be very busy. That probably had something to do with the two carriages full of goods we'd come into town with. Merchandise that made it all the way here from the Kingdom of Asura commanded high prices.

"...It's cold."

Many of the people coming and going wore decidedly thick clothing. It was understandable, given the chill in the air. The winters in this region were apparently very snowy. I'd have to pick up some appropriate cold-weather gear sooner rather than later.

Maybe I ought to take care of that right now, in fact...

No, finding an inn came first. I didn't have much luggage, but any experienced adventurer knew that securing a base of operations always had to be your top priority. With that decision made, I set off down the streets of Rosenberg.

There weren't many outdoor stalls in our immediate vicinity. That was definitely unusual. Maybe the carriages had come in through a different entrance than whichever one the local adventurers used? On second thought, it would be evening soon. In a

place this cold, it wouldn't be surprising if the outdoor merchants closed up shop before the sun began to set.

Before too long, I found a street lined with inns. I wandered around for a while looking at the rates posted out front, but eventually picked one more or less at random. The place was called "The Round-Shield Inn," and it was aimed at B-ranked adventurers. Kind of a strange name. I'd nearly mistaken it for an armor shop at first, since the sign out front was shaped like a buckler.

Normally, I would have been content with a cheaper place aimed at C- or D-ranked folk, but according to Suzanne, the cheap inns around here didn't come with heating. You could literally freeze to death in the winter, so it was smarter to find a B-ranked place, at the very least. I'd only half-listened to that woman's lectures, but she'd definitely given me a few valuable nuggets of knowledge. I needed to take the whole "information gathering" thing a bit more seriously.

"Hm?"

When I stepped inside, I found a man in the midst of cleaning up—presumably the owner. The guy took one look at me and grimaced like he'd just seen a cockroach scuttle across the floor. Real friendly.

"I'd like a room for, uh...a month, please."

"...Sure thing. I'll need a signature and a thumbprint here. Once you've paid up, you can have the last room on the third floor."

The innkeeper's face was less than welcoming, but he didn't hesitate in handing me a key and the check-in sheet. I filled it out as requested, then paid upfront for my entire stay. Fortunately, Asuran currency was still good in this area. I might need to exchange it for the local coin at some point, but that could wait. From what Suzanne told me, Asuran coins were better-trusted and more valuable anyway.

The innkeeper's eyes went wide when I counted out my Asuran silver coins on the front desk for him. I got the impression he didn't like the looks of me, but at least he was happy with my money.

I was still holding virtually all the cash my party had earned on our journey from the Demon Continent to Asura. We should have split those funds equally between us three, but it hadn't worked out that way in the end. On top of that, I'd also saved up a little of the money Alphonse gave me for helping out back at the refugee camp in Fittoa. A month's stay at an inn like this wasn't exactly cheap, but at this point I still had a decent financial cushion left. Of course, I'd still have to start earning cash again eventually.

I climbed to the third floor, found my room, and stepped inside to have a look. It had a bed, a closet, a table, and a chair. Typical enough. The only things about the room that stood out at first glance were the bare brick walls, which you didn't see too often in other countries, and the bulky stove that was built into one of them. Next to the stove was a small pile of wood and a few flints. You were presumably supposed to get it started yourself whenever you got cold. I had no idea how to work the thing, but I could always ask the innkeeper later.

"Hah..."

I tossed my luggage onto the floor and flopped down on my bed with a sigh. The sky outside my window was still pure white. Maybe overcast skies were just the norm in snowy countries like this.

Back in Asura, the sky was blue. Sometimes you could scan from one horizon to the other without seeing a single speck of cloud. I'd been staring up at that great blue expanse for most of my journey here; it really was a beautiful color. But the only color I could think about was its opposite—red—and what it symbolized.

"...!"

Okay, no. Let's not go down that road again. Let's not think about colors right now.

I decided to get a better look at the streets outside instead. I got out of bed, walked to the window, and looked out at Rosenberg. From the third floor of this inn, you could see almost the entire city. There was a surprising amount of green out there. The Duchy of Basherant tended to line its streets with trees planted at regular intervals. I'd heard it was to ensure everyone had an emergency supply of firewood when necessary, but the aesthetic results weren't half bad, either. It reminded me of the forest we'd passed through right after leaving Asura behind. That was a nice place. All those massive trees everywhere...the gentle rustling of leaves in the wind...

Yeah. Trees are good. Nature is good.

There's nothing like the great outdoors to help you forget all about the ugly, awful parts of the world. Soak in enough green, and you'll rinse all the sludge right out of your heart.

"Eris..."

The word slipped out of my mouth all on its own, and my mood took another brutal nosedive. You can rinse out your heart all you want, but it doesn't really help when it's been broken into roughly fifty thousand pieces.

To be honest, the way it ended had been a real shock. I was so convinced that Eris and I were a couple. I was so convinced we loved each other. I assumed we'd live together in Asura; I assumed she'd need my support now that she'd lost her parents. I was ready and willing to commit to her. Maybe it shouldn't really matter, but...she was my first, and I wanted to do the right thing. I wanted to stay with her. The Greyrat family was still nobility, so there might have been a few obstacles to overcome down the line. But I was determined to protect her, whether that meant standing against our enemies or running away from them together.

It wasn't meant to be, though. Eris didn't feel the same way at all. At the end of the day, I didn't mean anything to her.

I found myself sniffing a little. A hot, prickly sensation built in my nose.

I should just stop thinking about this.

It had been months since Eris walked out on me. How many times was I going to let the same thoughts echo in my head? The girl had disappeared. She was done with me. And I had my own problems to deal with. The two of us had parted ways, simple as that. We had different goals, so we were following different roads now. Was that so awful, really?

It wasn't like I was anything special. No one was ever going to fall head over heels in love with *me*. I ought to be grateful for any moments of happiness that came my way...no matter how brief.

Yeah, okay. That's enough of that. Let's focus on what we came here to do. You do remember why you're here, right?

I'd come to look for my mother, Zenith Greyrat. I certainly hadn't set off on this journey to distract myself from a painful breakup or anything. No, really. My decision to leave Asura behind had *nothing* to do with the fact that every day I spent there brought back memories of the girl who'd dumped me! I was here to search for the one member of my family who was still unaccounted for. She'd been missing for years, and I'd promised my father, Paul, that I'd do my best to track her down.

That said, I didn't really have a plan at the moment. What would it take to find her? What would even qualify as "searching" for her?

"Hahaa..."

Lately I could only seem to sigh. And all I could seem to think about were those final moments Eris and I had spent together. I'd been so happy for that one night, but then...

“Okay, no. Stop it.” I pushed those thoughts into the dark corners of my mind and tried to focus on the task at hand. My brain wasn’t in the mood to cooperate, but I wasn’t letting it off the hook this time. *Okay. First of all, let’s try making some educated guesses.*

Years had passed since the Displacement Incident. It seemed unlikely that Zenith was anywhere someone could easily find her. This city was large enough that it was tempting to believe she might be in it, but if it were that easy, someone would have found her years ago.

Still, it made sense to focus my efforts in heavily populated areas. It was hard to imagine Zenith camping out in the woods or anything. There was a chance she was trapped in some place the Search and Rescue Squad hadn’t been able to investigate. If I wanted to find any likely candidates, I’d need to nose around in cities like this one.

Still, I was on my own. No matter how hard I tried, I probably wouldn’t be able to search the city as thoroughly as I needed to. Where did that leave me, then?

“Okay...I guess my best shot is to have her find me instead, right?”

I dropped back upon my bed and gave the idea some careful thought. Now that I’d actually spoken it out loud, it sounded like a pretty decent plan. The world was a big place; it was always going to be hard to track down a single person who could be literally anywhere. Looking for Zenith was something like...trying to find a single left-handed person in a crowd of ten thousand people. It would take a ridiculous amount of time and effort.

But what if you told that crowd of people what was going on, instead of going through them one by one? If you shouted “Is anyone here left-handed?” at the crowd, maybe the guy you were looking for would just raise his hand and step forward.

Basically, if I got famous enough, there was a good chance *Zenith* might come find *me*.

Given how long she'd been missing, it was possible she was trapped somewhere, just as Lilia and Aisha had been. But if she heard that I was somewhere close nearby, she'd at least try to get a message to me, right? *Yeah. That could definitely work, right? I'll get famous somehow, and then Zenith can reach out to me. Let's go with that.*

"How do I make myself a celebrity, though...?" At the very least, I needed to have many people learn my name. But that was easier said than done, right?

Hmm...let's see. In the last couple years, I'd done a lot of PR work for Ruijerd—mainly doing good deeds in his name. I was trying to build a positive brand for the guy, basically. It was hard to say how effective it had really been, but I felt like we made a bit of an impact on the Demon Continent, at least.

If I took the same general approach here and made a name for myself as an adventurer, I could probably become well-known before too long. Unlike Ruijerd, I didn't have some weird curse to contend with. All I had to do was pull off a few impressive feats, and people would learn who I was. I shouldn't even have to bend the truth too much this time. The goal was for word to spread throughout the region about "a boy magician named Rudeus, looking for his mother Zenith, who disappeared after the Displacement Incident." At that point, either Zenith or somebody who knew about her might come to find me.

I'd probably have to deal with some false leads, which might get aggravating. But I wouldn't mind paying for genuine information if I had to.

"Man...I don't really want to do this..."

It wasn't going to be fun making a name for myself all alone in this miserably cold, snow-covered city. And even if I did manage to become a local celebrity, there was no guarantee I'd actually find Zenith. In fact, the odds were dismal. The Fittoa Search and Rescue Squad was a relatively large organization, and they'd looked all over for her with no success. I'd have to be incredibly lucky to do any better.

In a group the size of the Search and Rescue Squad, there had to be people cleverer and more thorough than me...and others more skilled at gathering information, or disseminating it. Those people had put all kinds of plans into motion, and tried their very hardest, and still never found Zenith. Was there even any point in my trying?

Was this just a pointless waste of time?

The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to sigh. But it wasn't like any alternatives were presenting themselves, and I couldn't just sit around doing nothing. If I tried everything that occurred to me, there was a chance I'd hit on some better ideas or stumble across a lead.

"I guess I should get some sleep..."

Deciding that I'd done enough thinking for one day, I let my eyes close. I thought I was used to traveling by now, but apparently that long, jolting carriage ride had been more exhausting than I realized. I was asleep in what felt like seconds.

The next day, I headed over to the Rosenberg Adventurers' Guild. Unlike most, it was located a good distance away from both the entrance to the city and the local inns. Maybe there was some logical reason for that... Not that I particularly cared.

“Guh...” When I stepped through the double doors, a lot of heads turned my way. I thought I’d gotten used to people staring at me during our journey to the Central Continent, but apparently, it was a different story when I was by myself. Until now, I always had Ruijerd and Er—

Yeah, let’s not continue that line of thought.

“Hey, look. Some kid just came in.”

“What? He a newbie or something...?”

“Heh. Probably wants to play make-believe.”

Even at a distance, I could hear a few people having fun at my expense. They weren’t actually jeering at me or anything, but it still felt bad. Back in the day, this sort of thing didn’t really bother me, but today, I felt little stabs of pain at every unkind word.

Still...anyone who looked as young as I did was going to stick out if he walked into a guild all by himself. I had to learn to deal with it. If I actually achieved my goal here, I’d be attracting attention whether I wanted it or not.

Right, then. There was something I needed to take care of before I took on any jobs.

Slowly and reluctantly, I trudged my way over to the reception area. The lady behind the counter wasn’t especially pretty, but she *was* wearing an outfit that revealed a lot of cleavage. It really did feel like they only hired women of a certain cup size for this job. I pushed my Adventurer Card across the counter. “Um...could you please...disband my party for me?”

The words “Dead End” still glowed faintly near the very bottom of my card. It was the name of my old party...the one I’d formed with Ruijerd and Eris. Both of them were gone now, so for all intents and purposes, Dead End no longer existed. I needed to disband the party. It was a thing of the past...

All of a sudden I was sniffing loudly. A moment later, I realized that tears were running down my face. I hadn't meant to cry, but I couldn't help myself.

Ruijerd and Eris weren't at my side anymore. I really was all alone. And it was really painful to be confronted with that fact.

"Of course. I'll take care of that right away." The clerk took my card and got to work with a somewhat sympathetic expression on her face. I'm sure it must have been kind of creepy to have some guy start blubbering in front of her like that, but she stayed professional. "Here you are."

"...Thanks." I wiped my tears with the sleeve of my robe and I took my card back. The words "Dead End" had vanished, leaving a blank space behind.

The next time they brought their cards to a guild branch, Eris and Ruijerd would learn that I'd disbanded the party. *How will they react when they see those words disappear? Maybe Ruijerd will feel a little sad. But Eris...*

Stop it. Stop. It doesn't matter. It's all over now.

"..."

When I turned away from the counter, I found that half of the people in the guild were looking my way. What was so interesting about me, anyway? Hadn't any of these people seen a blubbering kid before?

"Uh, why's he crying?"

"...Bet his party got wiped out."

"Poor kid. Guess he was the sole survivor..."

Apparently, I'd misunderstood. These were gazes of sympathy. Everyone seemed to assume the other members of my party were killed in battle or something. I'm sure none of them even suspected I might be crying because a girl had dumped me.

...I really was pathetic. If my party *had* died, at least I'd have some reason to be acting like such a baby. Not that I wanted anything to happen to Ruijerd or Eris, of course...

Without a word, I turned and headed for the central bulletin board.

It was almost completely covered in sheets of paper. There weren't quite as many jobs as you'd find in the Demon Continent guilds, but it was a massive difference from what I'd seen in the Kingdom of Asura. Adventurers were clearly in high demand around here, and jobs ranked B and C seemed to be the most common.

In Asura, most of the available jobs were of fairly low difficulty, and you'd find less and less work at the higher ranks. As a result, adventurers who'd climbed a little way up the rank ladder tended to leave that country behind, heading south to the King Dragon Realm or north to the nations of the Magic Alliance.

"Okay, let's see..." I was currently an A-ranked adventurer, and Guild rules also allowed me to take jobs one tier lower or higher than that. There weren't any S-ranked jobs posted at the moment, so I'd have to pick something from ranks A or B. Fortunately, there was a good amount of work available at those tiers. That was definitely rare on the Central Continent. It just went to show how tough life was here.

A: Slay the Luster Grizzly pack by Lake Cucuru

B: Guard a major logging operation in the Hadra Forest

B: Escort a caravan transporting goods to the Duchy of Neris

Hmm... Well, whatever. Any of them should be fine.

Without giving the matter too much thought, I pulled down the A-ranked job I'd spotted first. These "Luster Grizzlies" were presumably some sort of bear, but the details were kind of fuzzy. I didn't really care, and I didn't want to deal with asking around about the local monsters.

I headed back over to the reception area with the paper in my hand. "Excuse me. Can I take this one, please?"

The clerk took the paper along with my card, glanced down at it, and then blinked in surprise. "Huh? Um...where's your party?"

"Oh. Well, uh...I was hoping to handle this one solo, actually."

"What?" The woman seemed seriously bewildered for some reason. I'd just disbanded my party right at this counter, so I didn't get why she would assume that I had one. "Er, I think this might be a bit much for a single magician... A-ranked jobs are really meant to be tackled by a party, you see..."

"Uh, okay..."

"I'm sorry, but I just don't think we can give you this one."

The clerk had a point. You wouldn't normally try to take out a whole pack of monsters all by yourself. Still, it felt like an acceptable risk to me. I wasn't going to become famous unless I pushed myself a little. It was hard to say just how dangerous this specific job might turn out to be...but I didn't really care. It wasn't like I was enjoying my life, anyway. No matter how hard I tried, everything I cared about slipped away from me sooner or later. I'd always be miserable in the end. That wasn't ever going to change.

I didn't have anything to look forward to. What did it even matter if I lived or died, then?

As that thought ran through my mind, pain stabbed me somewhere deep in my chest. I reached reflexively into my pocket, grabbed hold of what I'd stashed inside it, and gritted my teeth. The pain in my chest didn't go away, but when I squeezed that object tightly, it made me feel at least a little better.

"Hey there. We having ourselves an argument?"

Someone had spoken to me from behind. It was enough to snap me back to reality. Mumbling "No, it's nothing like that," I turned around...and found a familiar face. It was that same dark-skinned warrior with the dreadlocks who kept talking to me on the trip up here. The girl who'd snapped at me was standing at her side, too. As I recalled, the woman warrior was Suzanne, and the girl was Sara.

There were a couple of men standing a little way behind them whom I recognized as well. They were probably the other members of the party, but I didn't remember any of their names.

I'd bumped into the B-ranked party "Counter Arrow."

"Well, I couldn't help overhearing. Your old party was wiped out, but you need money to look for your mother, right? Is that why you're trying to take on a job like that all by yourself? Very touching."

I hadn't said anything like that, just for the record. My party hadn't been "wiped out," and I wasn't exactly broke. I had enough cash to last me for a while at least.

"But here's the thing, kid...that look on your face is kind of a problem. You don't look like someone who's ready to take on the world alone. You look like a guy who doesn't even care if he lives or dies."



“...” I reached up and touched my face experimentally. My expression right now probably indicated that she’d seen right through me.

“On that note, I’ve got a proposal to make. How about we do that job together?”

“Together?”

“Yup. We just got here too, you know? Normally we’d try to tackle something like this by ourselves, but we’re on unfamiliar turf. Couldn’t hurt to cooperate while we all get a feel for things, don’tcha think?”

“Uh, I wanted to make a name for myself as a solo adventurer...it’s part of my plan to find my mother...”

“C’mon. No one ever got famous working solo, kid. If you want to build a reputation, you need to meet lots of people so they’ll spread the word about you. That means joining parties and doing your best to stay alive. Am I right, guys?”

The men of the party nodded in unison. Sara, on the other hand, just pouted. I got the feeling she wasn’t too thrilled about this whole idea, and I didn’t blame her. If you wanted to get a feel for an area, you’d team up with a veteran familiar with the local terrain and monsters, not some depressed kid who was as clueless as you were. It wasn’t like I’d helped them out with their guard duties on the trip up here, either. I’m sure they knew I was a magician from my outfit, but they had no way of knowing my skills, what kinds of spells I specialized in, or how powerful I was.

Basically, Suzanne was taking pity on me. She was inviting me to join them out of sympathy. That was all.

Still, she’d made a few good points. No matter how much I accomplished all by myself, it was hard to imagine anything but the vaguest of rumors circulating about me. Adventurers typically weren’t that interested in other adventurers; they weren’t going to

go out of their way to learn about some kid they didn't care about. At best, word might get around that a young magician was pulling off some impressive things by himself. But I needed them to include the details: the fact that I was from Fittoa, was capable of silent casting, and was looking for my mother who'd gone missing in the Displacement Incident.

If I wanted people to spread my story around, I had to let them get to know me. And the easiest way to do that was to join a party.

Not just one party, in fact. It would be best if I worked with as many as I could.

Although many adventurers preferred to stay put in a single city, sometimes you'd meet groups earning money on their way to somewhere else, the way we did in the Demon Continent. Maybe if I focused on getting to know those people...

"You look pretty young, but if you're A-rank, I'm guessing you can hold your own in a fight. What's your specialty?"

"Well...in my old party, I stuck to the rear of our formation. I'm good at supporting frontline fighters with my magic."

"Sounds perfect, then. We were just thinking our party could use someone else in the backline."

All in all, taking this Suzanne woman up on her offer did feel like the smarter move. "Okay then... I'll come along, if you'll have me."

"Fantastic. Let's take the rest of today to get ourselves prepared, then. How about we meet up at the north gate tomorrow morning? We'll fill you in on our formation while we travel."

"Sure." The whole thing felt a little slapdash, but I didn't mind.

That Sara girl never got any less scowly, though.

Chapter 2: The Luster Grizzlies

The next morning, I dutifully headed over to the northern gate of the city. I wasn't feeling too enthusiastic about this expedition, but my body moved along on autopilot. I'd actually gathered some information on the Luster Grizzlies and this Lake Cucuru place before I went to bed. The habits I'd picked up on the Demon Continent must have kicked in.

I looked around the dark, quiet streets. Suzanne hadn't specified an exact time to meet, so I'd showed up as early as I could. It didn't look like they were here yet. It was hard to say without any clocks around, but it was probably around four in the morning. Maybe they were still asleep.

Honestly, I hadn't gotten that much rest last night. It was cold here, for one thing. And I might have been a little nervous about teaming up with a group of people I didn't know too well. "They're taking their time..."

When adventurers set off on a job, the general rule was that you met up first thing in the morning. Maybe I'd come *too* early this time, but it beat showing up late. The last thing I needed was to get left behind and end up moping around by myself all day.

It wasn't like I was the only one out here, either. There was another party hanging around near the gate as well. They seemed to be waiting on one last straggler.

Still, it was possible that I'd gotten the wrong idea at some point. Maybe they wouldn't be coming until noon? It might make sense to leave later if you decided to arrive at your destination at a specific time. But then again, I told them which inn I was staying at. If they'd worked out a different departure time, wouldn't they have gotten in touch with me?

“Oh.” Just as my thoughts were starting to spin in circles, I spotted a small group of people walking toward me through the morning mist.

“Hey there!” called Suzanne from the head of the column. “You’re here early. You didn’t seem too enthusiastic yesterday, so I sort of assumed you’d keep us waiting.”

“...I just woke up a little early today, that’s all.”

“Hmmm...” Suzanne seemed amused. Maybe she thought I’d showed up early because I was secretly lonely and yearning for human contact or something? That wasn’t really true, but...I didn’t feel like bothering to deny it.

“Okay then,” I said, removing my hand from my pocket and offering it to her. “Thanks for having me as a temporary member of your party. My name’s Rudeus Greyrat. I’m a magician and an A-ranked adventurer. Like I said yesterday, I’m good at support magic.”

Suzanne blinked in surprise. I wasn’t too friendly on the trip up here, and she probably hadn’t expected me to get all polite at this point. I hadn’t planned this in advance; it just felt like I ought to formally introduce myself, at least.

“Well, my name’s Suzanne. I’m the sub-leader of Counter Arrow, and a warrior by trade. I fight on the frontline.”

“Sub-leader? You’re not the one in charge?”

“I do boss people around sometimes, but we’ve got an actual leader, too.” Suzanne jerked her chin at one of the men behind her, who nodded and stepped forward. My first impression of the guy was that he seemed a little...glum. Judging from his brownish-red robe and the long staff he carried, he was probably a magician, too.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Timothy, a magician. My specialty’s offensive magic, and I fight on the backline. Technically, I’m also the leader of this party.”

“Nice to meet you.”

I got the feeling that Suzanne probably held the real power around here. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing to have someone a rung below the top calling the shots, though. I mean, aren't you supposed to put the lazy, stupid people in command or something? Not that I was calling this guy a moron, of course...

Also, a strict chain of command can be kind of fragile. Once someone disobeys a single order, the whole thing just falls apart. But with a setup like this, Timothy could conceivably step in to override Suzanne if things got dicey. Or maybe Timothy decided their general strategy, and Suzanne just took care of all the details? While she put their plans into action, he could keep an eye on the big picture and course-correct if they got too far off track.

In any case, the two of them had clearly found some way to work together smoothly. *One hell of a difference from me and Eris... Sniffle...*

“Huh?! Wh-what's the matter?!”

“Sorry. This just brought back some memories, that's all.”

“I see... My condolences, Rudeus. The leader of your former party must have been a wonderful person.”

“Uh, not really...” Dead End's leader had been a useless idiot from start to finish. The guy we named the party after was a much better man by any measure. “Anyway, um, I'll do my best not to cause you any trouble.”

“Well, all right then... I'm looking forward to working with you.” Timothy stepped back, and the other party members took their cue to introduce themselves.

“Hey there. The name's Mimir, and I'm the healer. I'm intermediate rank in Healing magic and beginner rank in Detoxification.” Mimir was a man of average height and weight who wore a plain white robe.

“I’m the warrior mage, Patrice. Don’t expect too much on the ‘mage’ front, though. I only know the beginner-tier wind spells.” And Patrice was a muscular frontliner who carried a sword at his hip and a small beginner’s wand in one hand.

They both seemed to be in their mid-to-late twenties, about the same age as Timothy. I didn’t know how long they’d been adventuring, but if they’d hit the B-rank, they were presumably seasoned veterans.

Finally, there was the last member of the party...

“I’m Sara. I’m an archer. I fight from the midline.”

...who, for some reason, was glaring at me again.

Sara was notably younger than the other four members of her party. She was probably in her mid-teens—right on the verge of adulthood, by the standards of this world. I don’t know if it was her sharp expression, or the fact that her facial features were classically Asuran...but I felt like she kind of resembled Eris. At least a little.

“What? You have something to say?”

“Sorry, no. It’s nothing...” Her glare was getting even fiercer, so I averted my eyes.

“Just for your information, I’m not happy about this. I’m only putting up with you because Suzanne insisted, okay? If you screw up and get someone killed, I *promise* you’ll regret it.”

“...Right.”

I didn’t bother trying to placate her. It was always better to get along with your teammates, of course. But it wasn’t like we’d be working together for very long. If she was going to be this hostile, I might as well just keep my distance.

“Cut it out, Sara.”

“But Suzanne—”

“Look. Someday we might go our separate ways, right? You might end up having to join a new party full of strangers.”

“Wait, what? Are you going to disband the party or something?”

“It might happen eventually. And if one of us dies, we’ll have to bring in someone new to replace them, you know?” Suzanne sighed and shook her head. “Back in Asura, you could get away with rejecting teammates who annoyed you. But from now on, that might not be an option. It’s about time you learned to work with people other than us.”

Ah. Now things made a bit more sense. Suzanne hadn’t just invited me out of sympathy. She was using me a teaching tool. That explained why she’d been so persistent. It made sense to choose a younger guy like me if she was thinking five or ten years ahead. By that point, Sara would be more seasoned, and might find herself teaming up with younger and less experienced kids. Also, once she managed to work with an unfriendly jerk like me, everyone else would seem easier to put up with.

I wasn’t sure how I felt about this, honestly...but it didn’t matter. Couldn’t hurt to play along, right? It wasn’t costing me anything.

“You got the message? Good. Now that we’ve all introduced ourselves, let’s get going.”

With that said, the six of us set off on our Grizzly-slaying expedition.

Three days later, having travelled a decent distance north of Rosenberg, we set up camp near our destination. Lake Cucuru, where this pack of monsters could supposedly be found, was only a few hours away. Luster Grizzlies couldn’t see too well in the dark,

and moved sluggishly at night. Our plan was to wait until the sun set before we launched our surprise attack.

In the meantime, we had a group meeting to discuss our performance in the battles we'd fought on the way up here. Counter Arrow wasn't a bad party by any means. With two in the vanguard, one ranged fighter, and two rear guard, they felt like a well-balanced group.

They'd slotted me into a ranged support role, which meant casting Quagmire the instant we spotted enemies in the distance. After I slowed them down, Timothy used his fire magic to cut down their numbers long-range. Once the survivors closed in, Suzanne and Patrice stepped forward to fight, and Sara backed them up at medium range. When one of the frontliners took a hit, Mimir immediately healed them.

We took out plenty of monsters on the road north, and this plan had always worked out smoothly enough. Suzanne, Timothy, Mimir, and Patrice definitely knew what they were doing. They weren't exactly on Ruijerd's level, of course, but when it came to teamwork, they put Eris to shame.

That said... I couldn't help feeling a little underutilized, since casting Quagmire was literally my only job. I'd decided to put forward a few proposals. "Um, maybe I could switch over to support when the enemies reach our frontline?"

Unfortunately, Sara shot down all my ideas one by one. "You don't know how Suzanne and Patrice fight yet! We don't need you hitting them by accident! Just stay put!"

"Okay then. Why don't I help Timothy thin down their numbers after I slow them down?"

"Magicians are supposed to keep some mana in reserve during longer battles, stupid! You just stop them in their tracks. That's all we need from you!"

“Uh...could I at least move forward once the enemy’s closed in on us, then?”

“Do you *want* me to shoot you in the back, or what?”

To be honest, it felt like I was fighting with my hands tied behind my back. If I joined the attack with Timothy, we could probably have wiped out most groups of monsters at long range, instead of letting them get in close enough to hurt the frontline fighters.

Still, efficiency wasn’t everything. Sara was getting more practice this way, after all. I’d done something similar on the Demon Continent myself. And at the end of the day, I was only a temporary member of this party. I didn’t have much choice but to keep my mouth shut and try to learn their way of doing things. As long as I could think on my feet in an emergency, it did make sense to hold back instead of trying to do everything myself. Teamwork was a skill you had to build up through practice, after all.

I wasn’t sure I *could* act quickly under pressure, though...

“Look, you’re not really a member of this party, okay? Just do what you’re told and try not to make a nuisance of yourself.”

“All right.”

Sara certainly didn’t seem very interested in learning to work with me, either. It sure felt like she hated my guts—maybe because I’d made such a lousy first impression. It wasn’t like I needed to make friends with her, but this open hostility brought back some memories that stung a little. When I first started as Eris’ tutor, she treated me the same way for a while.

“Sara, I think you’ve made your point,” said Suzanne. “Why are you being so hostile to him?”

“It’s just... I don’t know! He’s younger than me, but his attitude’s kind of disrespectful...”

“That’s totally normal for an adventurer, kiddo. You’re pretty casual with us yourself, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Well then, try to keep your irritation to yourself. We’re about to start on the main part of the job, remember? This isn’t a great time for you to make things awkward.”

“Uh, sorry...” Sara cringed a little when Suzanne scolded her. Judging from the look she shot in my direction, though, she wasn’t planning to apologize. Once we finished up with the group meeting, she lay down for a nap and dozed off almost instantly.

That’s youth for you, I guess. I decided to get some sleep as well once I’d relieved myself. Wandering a little way out of our camp, I found a relatively private spot to piss in. Just as I was getting started, though, I heard someone coming up from behind.

It was Timothy. He took a spot beside me, opened his robe, revealed a surprisingly sizable...uh, wand...and started emptying his bladder as well.

“Sorry about that, Rudeus,” he said after a moment.

“...About what?” I wasn’t entirely sure what he was even apologizing for.

“Sara. She’s not a bad kid, but she’s gotten a little full of herself lately, you know?”

“You can hardly blame her. That girl’s a prodigy with the bow.”

The four B-ranked members of Counter Arrow were seasoned veterans, yes, but Sara stood out for her sheer talent. I’d seen her shoot down monster after monster with perfectly placed arrows, even at long range. Her battlefield awareness and agility were top notch, and she never seemed to slip up. When it came to combat, she was already on the level of an A-ranked adventurer.

Archers weren't particularly common in this world. Mages could strike from a greater range and do more damage with their attacks, and while a magician could regain their mana after a good night's sleep, an archer was limited by their arrows. The more you carried, the more weight you had to lug around. This wasn't some RPG where you could stash ten thousand of the things in your backpack. For the most part, you were better off learning magic than the bow.

That said, a truly special talent could make all those disadvantages seem irrelevant. When you could fire five arrows in the time it took a magician to cast a single spell, or land a critical hit every single time, you could get by just fine as an archer. In this line of work, at least.

If you wanted to become the single strongest person in the entire world, that was a different story.

At any, Sara was incredibly skilled for her age. Her raw talent was probably comparable to that of Eris.

"Well, you're no slouch yourself, aren't you? That's fairly obvious. I mean, you're the first silent spellcaster I've seen since my teacher at the academy."

"...It hasn't done me much good. I still lost everyone I cared about."

"Ah. Right. My apologies."

Silent spellcasting was a helpful skill, of course, but knowing a few tricks like that didn't make me special. What good was any of it if I couldn't even keep a single girl happy?

Well, I guess it might help me earn some name recognition, at least... There was a chance I'd attract some unwanted attention. But Zenith knew I could cast spells silently, so it was probably worth advertising that fact.

"Anyway, I'm sorry about all this, Rudeus."

“That’s all right...”

This was kind of interesting, though. Maybe the older members of the party *had* realized I was more capable than I looked, after all. I guess they’d learned how to size people up over the years. Those four were very good at fully utilizing every tool and resource at their disposal.

In terms of raw combat strength, they were probably comparable to highly skilled C-ranked adventurers. But through sheer efficiency and coordination, they got by just fine as a B-ranked party. Counter Arrow was more than the sum of its parts. They knew their own capabilities, and they divided tasks accordingly.

That didn’t leave much room for anyone to mess around or experiment, though. When Sara told me to stick to my basic duties, they scolded her for her attitude, but didn’t actually contradict what she was saying. That was partially because they wanted her to get more practice, but it was also a reflection of their methodical, systematic approach.

There was a downside there. Since we never experimented with anything other than their set strategies, they didn’t know exactly what I could and couldn’t do. That might lead to some serious problems, especially if they’d overestimated me. Timothy and the others had been keeping an eye on me, of course, but they were also trying to see how well they could deal with the monsters in this unfamiliar country. I could just *tell* them my own strengths and weaknesses, but they’d probably take my claims with a grain of salt.

You had to wonder why they’d even brought me along, under the circumstances...but the “sympathy” thing was probably relevant there. People don’t always act in purely rational ways.

“It doesn’t really bother me.” Right now, all I could really do was stick to my role as a Quagmire-casting robot and try not to overthink things.

“Thanks for being so understanding. We’ll be heading out once the sun sets, so try to get some rest until then.”

“Sure.”

With a nod to Timothy, I headed back to the camp to catch a few hours’ sleep.

The Luster Grizzly was a B-ranked monster, one of the more common kinds found in the northern region of the Central Continent. In appearance, it was basically a large bear with a white coat and a single black stripe that ran vertically down its middle. But they differed from most bears in a few important respects: they moved in sizable packs, and when winter drew near, they worked together to build up huge collective stockpiles of food. At that time of year, their attacks on humans grew much more frequent.

That said, they were comparatively mellow in the summer months, when they tended to hang around sources of water to mate. Adventurers often took this opportunity to exterminate them. The standard method of dealing with a large pack was to find them during mating season and launch a surprise attack at night.

“All right then...”

After clambering up to the top of a slight hill near Lake Cucuru, we spotted the Luster Grizzlies in the distance. We were downwind from them and well-hidden by the brush. There wasn’t much risk of them noticing our presence...especially since they were fast asleep after copulating all afternoon and evening. Luster Grizzlies didn’t bother digging holes to sleep in. When they got tired, they just flopped on the ground like sea lions.

We were going to fire magic at them from a distance, hopefully killing many of them and sending the others into a panic. Once they did start running in our direction, there wouldn't be enough of them left to give our close-range fighters any trouble.

Assuming everything went according to plan, of course.

"What've we got, Sara?"

"Looks like there's about twenty of them..."

As we lay flat on top of the hill, Sara peered out at the distant group of monsters. Unsurprisingly, she had the best eyes in the party. If she thought there were twenty of them, I was going to have to take her word for it. In the darkness, all I could make out were a few little white dots scattered around maybe three hundred meters away.

From this range, Ruijerd could have given us a precise report on their numbers in an instant...but he wasn't here, so there wasn't much point in thinking about it.

"You think we can take them?" murmured Suzanne.

"We'll be fine! Right, guys?" said Sara, turning back to us with a face filled with confidence.

I wasn't sure how quickly Luster Grizzlies could run, but we did have a positional advantage. I could slow their charge down with a well-placed Quagmire, and since we'd all gotten some rest beforehand, Timothy, Patrice, and Mimir had plenty of mana to work with.

"All right then," said Timothy. "Let's get started."

Suddenly, everyone was laser-focused on the task at hand. Twenty Grizzlies did seem like a manageable number, but that was no reason to get overconfident. I clutched my staff tightly in my hands and stared intently into the darkness, just like the others.

“Let the vast and blessed flame converge at thy command! O raging fire, offer us a great and blazing gift! *Great Fireball!*”

“Quagmire!”

Just as Timothy finished the incantation for his intermediate-tier Fire spell, I transformed a large patch of ground into a thick, muddy bog. I tried to place it just inside Sara’s range of fire; if the Grizzlies were stopped in their tracks here, she’d be able to pick them off with ease.

“Let the vast and blessed flame converge at thy command! O raging fire, offer us a great and blazing gift! *Great Fireball!*”

Timothy had already launched a second Great Fireball in quick succession. The thing had to be two meters in diameter, but it hurtled through the air with impressive speed. I watched as it struck one of the Grizzlies. Even from this distance, I could tell the monster had died instantly. I’d seen Timothy do this a number of times on our way up here, but his Great Fireball really was remarkably powerful, quick, and precise. You could tell he had a great deal of experience casting it.

“They’ve spotted us!” One by one, the roaring, furious Luster Grizzlies began to run in our direction.

Some of Timothy’s fireballs missed their targets now that the monsters were in motion, but he still managed to pick off quite a few of them as they drew closer. Everything was going smoothly so far. By the time they reached the spot where I’d placed my Quagmire, half the Grizzlies were dead. Since Sara would be taking more of them down from this point on, it seemed possible that we’d wipe the creatures out before they even got in close.

Pretty easy for an A-ranked job, really...

...Or so I thought for a fraction of a second.

“Huh?!”

Just before the pack of Luster Grizzlies hit my Quagmire, one of Timothy's fireballs briefly illuminated the area all around them. There were other shapes moving through the darkness. Many other shapes, off to the side of the bog that I'd created.

Whatever they were, they were jet-black...and the same size as the Luster Grizzlies.

"What?! Are those *black* Grizzlies?!" shouted Sara.

When I heard those words, something clicked inside my mind.

Those shapes were Luster Grizzlies, all right. They were just covered in mud. For all intents and purposes, they were wearing camouflage.

Of course, it wasn't mud from my Quagmire. There must have been another pack at the lake, sleeping in a boggy area not far from the group we'd spotted. When the pack next to them came under attack, they'd woken up and spotted us.

"There's way too many of them!"

"Retreat! Retreat!" Flustered, Timothy shouted the order to fall back.

It was an understandable reaction. This second pack was *huge*; there had to be more than sixty of them. And they were rushing right at us, faintly visible thanks to the small fires left behind by Timothy's magic.

I guess he'd made a snap judgment that we couldn't hope to win this fight...but to be honest, it was a little late to be retreating now. Ideally, we would have noticed this pack before we attacked the other one, and decided not to risk this in the first place. It had been a serious mistake not to scout out the area during the daylight hours.

"We can't fight them here!" Suzanne shouted from somewhere in the darkness. "Fall back to that place we found on the way!"

Earlier on, we'd found a natural chokepoint where we could lead the Grizzlies in case their numbers proved too much to handle. If we made it there and regrouped... But again, it was too late for that. To reach that chokepoint, we'd need far more distance between us and the monsters, and a huge Quagmire in their path to slow them down. We couldn't hope to get away from a pack of Luster Grizzlies running at full tilt with no obstacles in their way.

There just weren't any options left here.

"It's no good! They'll catch up to us!"

"Tch! I'll keep them busy! The rest of you make a run for it!"

"Suzanne!"

Suzanne had stopped dead in her tracks. Sara spun around, her face pale and fearful. "No! I'll stay behind! This is my fault! I'm the one who didn't notice them!"

"You wouldn't even slow them down, kid!"

"Don't be an idiot, Suzanne!" said Patrice. "There's too many of them for *anyone* to hold off alone! If you're not running, nobody is!"

"All right! Let's show 'em what we're made of!" called Mimir.

Abandoning the attempted retreat, everyone lifted their weapons and prepared to fight. The pack of Luster Grizzlies bore down on us with ferocious speed, loud and violent as an earthquake. Even in the darkness, it was a terrifying sight.

Sara's legs were trembling. She wasn't the only one, either. Suzanne, Mimir, Patrice, and Timothy all looked like they were staring death straight in the face.

But not a single one of them tried to flee.

As I stared at the five of them, I felt my heart pounding in my chest. Was it because the Luster Grizzlies were closing in on us? No. Definitely not. That didn't even feel important.

It was Suzanne. And Sara. And Timothy, Mimir, and Patrice.

For some reason, looking at them stirred something in me. My breath grew rough. I didn't know what this emotion was exactly, but it was *intense*. Something about the way they were facing down that horde of monsters...really struck a chord with me.

"Ah..."

At some point, I'd reached into my pocket to clutch at what I had in there.

"What are you doing, Rudeus?!" shouted Patrice.

The others all glanced back in my direction. For an instant, I saw their faces. There was no despair on any of them. Not even Sara's. They were all desperate and determined to find some way to survive. Even now, none of them had given up. None of them had accepted their own death.

I knew, in that instant, why they'd chosen to stand their ground and fight. I read the answer on their faces. I felt it inside my pocket. And I saw it in a memory that flashed briefly through my mind.

I'd known the answer for a long time now.

And now that I remembered it...

"It's all right. I'll handle this." I spoke to them so calmly that I surprised even myself.

Keeping my emotions hidden as best I could, I pointed my staff directly at the onrushing group of mud-coated Luster Grizzlies.

"Exodus Flame."

An enormous wave of magical fire cut through the pack like a hot knife through butter.



An hour passed. The area around the lake had been reduced to a charred wasteland. The corpses of Luster Grizzlies were everywhere. Most had been burned to a crisp, but a few still had their pelts reasonably intact. At the moment, we were skinning as many of them as we could.

My fire magic had wiped out the majority of the Grizzlies. After that, they split up and began to run in all directions. A handful did keep charging at us, but Suzanne and the others dealt with those, and I picked off the ones that tried to flee with Stone Cannon.

Once the last monster went down, everyone just stood around in silence for a long moment, until I finally proposed that we get to work on the bodies. We'd been at it for a while now.

We needed to bring back the Luster Grizzlies' tails to prove that we'd done our job, and their pelts to sell for cash. Naturally, their fur fetched a pretty decent price. It was standard practice for adventurers to lug back as much of it as they could carry. We'd split into teams of two for the messy part. I'd been paired up with Timothy, my fellow magician. He'd been silent for some time now. I got the feeling he wasn't exactly sure what to say to me.

It wasn't just Timothy, though. Everyone else was quiet, too. Still, it wasn't the worst kind of silence in the world. I didn't feel any need to break it.

By the time we'd skinned the Grizzlies, collected their tails and pelts, and began to burn their bodies in a pile, the sky was beginning to lighten. The air filled with the smell of sizzling meat. It was a scent I'd come to associate with the end of a successful monster-slaying job.

As I watched the fire, Suzanne came to stand at my side. "I guess we owe you one, huh?" she said, shrugging her shoulders. "If it

wasn't for you, we'd all be dead. I had the feeling there was more to you than meets the eye, but I sure as hell wasn't expecting a performance like *that*."

"I don't know. If it wasn't for me, you guys wouldn't have taken on this job in the first place, right? You probably would have started off with a B- or even C-ranked job to get a feel for the area."

"Well, true enough..."

Suzanne scratched at her cheek with an awkward look on her face, but I meant every word sincerely. If anything, I was grateful for Counter Arrow. They helped me realize something in the middle of that battle, and I felt a little better because of it. "I'm glad you brought me out here, though. Thank you again."

"...Any time, kid. You about ready to head back?"

"Sure."

Suzanne looked me in the face and smiled, then turned to walk back toward our pile of pelts. The next step was to make our triumphant return to Rosenberg, lugging as many of those things as we could. The monsters had been slain, but that didn't mean our job was done yet. It wasn't over until you brought back the proof and sold off your loot.

A few moments later, as I was hefting a bundle of pelts over my shoulder, I noticed someone had come over to stand in front of me. It wasn't Suzanne this time; it was a girl about my own height.

"...Thanks for the save."

With those brief words, Sara promptly turned around and ran back over to Suzanne.

When the six of us returned to the Rosenberg Adventurers' Guild carrying dozens of pelts, we were met with less-than-friendly gazes from the locals. Many adventurers worked out of a single city for many years, or even for their entire career. When outsiders showed up out of nowhere and immediately pulled off a big, lucrative job, it always inspired at least a little hostility of this kind. In rougher towns, you'd actually get people coming up to harass you and demand a cut of your earnings.

I glanced over at Timothy, wondering how he'd handle this. To my surprise, I found him looking around the room with a bright smile on his face, as if the other adventurers were old friends instead of glowering, resentful strangers. "Tonight, we're celebrating my party's arrival in Rosenberg!" he shouted to the crowd. "Let's head over to the bar, everyone. I'm buying!"

For a moment the other adventurers were too startled to react, but they knew a good deal when they heard one. Cheers went up all around the room.

"Hey, the new kids in town seem friendly for once!"

"Hahaha! I *like* you guys!"

"Hell yeah! Free booze!"

I was stunned, to be honest. Was Timothy really tossing away the earnings from a seven-day job this casually?

Suzanne saw the look on my face and smiled, looking over at her leader proudly. "This is how Timothy always does things. If you buy everyone a couple drinks now and then, nobody's gonna hate your guts, right? It's a small price to pay for keeping the less friendly guys off your back."

Huh. When she put it that way, it actually made sense. The more money and success you had, the more envious people grew. That was just a fact of life. Adventurers had to live off the money they earned on quests, so this definitely wasn't something you could do

that often...but if you showed a little generosity on major paydays, it would reduce the hostility coming your way.

“All right, everyone! You just remember our names, okay? We’re Counter Arrow, and he’s Rudeus Greyrat! We’re looking forward to working with you!”

“Counter Arrow! Counter Arrow!”

“Rudeus! Rudeus!”

Based on the hearty chants around us, Timothy had definitely earned us some temporary popularity. If his strategy was *this* effective, I’d have to try and follow his example. It would be nice if I could avoid pointless fights with people like Sara.

With that thought, I let the crowd carry me along as it surged toward the nearest bar.

I finally made it back to my inn several hours later. The others had talked me into having a couple drinks at the bar. Unfortunately, I wasn’t used to alcohol, and the only kind they had in this city was some whiskey-like stuff with a real kick to it. I quickly got sick to my stomach and had to cast Detoxification magic on myself. That wasn’t a mistake I’d be making again.

Using a basic Healing spell on my still-aching head, I walked across my room to start a fire in the heating stove.

“Phew...”

Before long, small flames were dancing over the wood inside the metal box. It would probably take some time for the room to warm up significantly, but just gazing at the fire was oddly comforting.

As I stared at the flickering flames, I reached into my pocket and retrieved a certain something. It was a white piece of cloth. No mere handkerchief, of course; this was something Lilia had delivered to me against all odds, despite everything we'd lost in the Displacement Incident.

It was my holy relic. I'd kept it safe in my pocket the entire length of my journey here. I grabbed it with both hands and pressed it firmly to my forehead.

When I saw the members of Counter Arrow turn to fight that horde of Luster Grizzlies, it was an image of Roxy that had flashed so vividly through my mind.

Roxy was the strongest, most determined person I'd ever known.

I'd never actually seen her in a life-and-death situation, but I knew that she'd once been an adventurer herself. When her party found itself in danger, she'd probably turned and faced it with them, just as the members of Counter Arrow had. She'd protected her friends bravely, and been protected in return. She'd survived.

And then...she became my tutor. She taught me all the things she'd learned in her life as an adventurer. She taught me what it meant to be alive.

But she wasn't born knowing any of that. She figured it out for herself, in the years she spent fighting alongside others.

"Of *course* it matters if you die, moron..." I tightly clutched the white cloth to my chest for a moment. "You lost everything you cared about? Says who?!"

I pressed the white cloth to my forehead so that my tears wouldn't stain it, curled into a ball and began to sob. Before long I was blubbering, my body quivering with every painful hiccup.

I hadn't lost everything. Not by a long shot. I'd lost something that I cared about very much. That was true. But it didn't mean that I had nothing left to live for.

Remember when you first arrived in this world. Remember Roxy. Remember the day she showed you the outside world. You learned all sorts of things from her. She taught you so much. You can't betray her now.

Roxy wasn't the only one who'd given me something, either. I touched the wooden pendant I wore around my neck. It was a gift from Lilia—a gift she'd probably made by hand. Lilia had always been so kind and devoted to me. She was probably looking forward to the day we'd see each other again. And somewhere up in Millis, Paul was doing his best to reunite our family. We were very far away from each other, yes. But still, I wasn't alone in this world.

"Roxy...please show me the way..."

I couldn't just lie down and die out here in the middle of nowhere. Yes, I was still in pain. There was no point pretending otherwise. But I'd been through worse than this a long time ago.

You can't just fall to pieces now, damn it. Keep moving forward. Do the things you need to do.

"...All right then."

I opened my luggage and took out a different piece of fabric. It was my memento of Eris—the one I'd been lugging around with me all this time, no matter how miserable it made me feel.

Without a word, I tossed it into the heating stove.

Sara

To be honest, I underestimated him.

The first thing that came to mind when I heard the name “Greyrat” was the noble who’d ruled over the town where I was born. The Nostos Greyrat family controlled the entire Milbotts Region. I’d seen the lord himself just once, when I was very young. He’d come to our village with a group of soldiers to hunt down some monsters nearby. My memories from back then were mostly pretty fuzzy, but I remembered that crafty-looking face of his very clearly. And Rudeus looked a lot like him.

“Greyrat” isn’t that rare a last name in the Kingdom of Asura, of course. But most people who have it are either low- or mid-ranked nobles. You won’t find many of them among the ordinary villagers or townsfolk. In fact, the common people usually don’t have a last name at all. I know I don’t. I was born to a hunter and his wife, and the name “Sara” was all that they could offer me. My mom and dad only had single names as well.

Long story short, this “Rudeus Greyrat” was obviously a rich kid. He’d put on a cheap robe and let his hair grow wild in an attempt to disguise himself as an ordinary adventurer, but that expensive-looking staff he carried was a dead giveaway. You could practically smell the cluelessness on him.

Why would the son of some Asuran noble leave his country behind and head out to the Northern Territories, of all places?

The look on his face made that clear enough. The kid spoke politely enough, but he always looked gloomy as hell, and his attitude just screamed “leave me alone.” He’d probably had some trouble at his rich-kid boarding school, or gotten into a fight with his parents. In other words, he was running away from home.

It wasn’t that unusual, really. I couldn’t begin to understand it, but apparently some young Asuran nobles can’t put up with having everything they want handed to them on a silver platter. And after

fleeing from their schools or mansions, they usually try to become adventurers.

The children of the nobility are educated from a very young age. The main focus is normal stuff like reading, writing, and arithmetic, but lots of families have their kids trained in swordplay, too. Some noble houses consider magic less important, but many academies also require their students to learn beginner spells.

So you have these kids who've picked up some basic combat skills, and then they start to learn a bit about the outside world at their academies. At that point, for whatever reason, a lot of them decide to hop off their easy ride through life. It's particularly common in boys around Rudeus' age. I'd been on guard duty for kids like him a few times before, although none of them were brave enough to try leaving Asura. The majority only lasted for a job or two before they got scared and headed back to where they came from. Of course, every once in a while, one of them turns out to have some actual talent and becomes a real adventurer, but I'd never met one.

I figured Rudeus was just another of those rich kids. And I've always *hated* those kids. They're born into wealthy homes and handed excellent educations. They can live in luxury and never have to work. The thought of people like that trying to become adventurers made me furious.

Maybe it wouldn't bother me so much if they were actually committed. But in my experience, they're never ready to risk their lives the way we have to every day. When some monster takes a swipe at them, or another member of their party is in danger, the rich kids always turn tail and run.

The reason for that's simple enough: They've still got somewhere to run back to. When things get too ugly or scary, they can always just head back home. Even as they try to become adventurers, they've always got that backup plan stashed in the

corner of their mind. It doesn't even occur to them that some of us don't have that option. They don't even realize that some people have to spend the rest of their lives as adventurers. And they drag us along on their pointless little games, never sparing a thought for what might happen to us if we get injured badly enough to lose our livelihood.

I'd assumed Rudeus was just another of those useless brats. That story about his missing mother shocked me at first, but after a little while, I started to think it was probably a lie. It seemed more likely that he just wanted to prove how "different" and "special" he was by playing at being an adventurer in the Northern Territories, instead of Asura. I figured he'd run off if things ever got even slightly dicey. So I tried to keep his role in our party to a minimum, hoping to at least keep him from sabotaging us.

To be honest, I underestimated him.

Instead of running for his life, he'd wiped out that massive pack of Luster Grizzlies almost single-handedly. He was clearly an Advanced- or even Saint-tier magician; for some reason, he'd hidden that from us.

That only annoyed me even more. There was no denying that he'd saved our party, so I did say thanks. But I still wasn't feeling especially grateful.

"Come on, Sara. How long are you going to sulk?"

"Who says I'm sulking?!" My irritation hadn't faded even after we returned to our inn. I didn't want to admit that this one rich kid was any different from the others. He was still an aristocrat, and I *hated* aristocrats. "What is with you lately, Suzanne? Why do you keep looking out for that guy?"

"Come on, Sara, what was I supposed to do? A kid that young shouldn't be travelling all alone, right? It would've left a real bad

taste in my mouth if he got killed or something. I mean, it seems like he can take care of himself, but still...”

“Who cares? If he gets himself killed, it’s his own stupid fault! That story about his mom has to be bogus, anyway. He’s probably just running away from home or something.”

“Sara, I know you don’t want to admit it, but he’s obviously telling the truth. Don’t pretend you don’t know that.”

Suzanne wasn’t wrong. If Rudeus was lying, he wouldn’t have stood his ground with us. He wouldn’t have broken down and cried in the middle of the Adventurers’ Guild. I knew that much.

I knew what he said was true. He really was a victim of the Fittoa Displacement Incident. He really had spent years learning magic and making his way back home, only to find his home had vanished. He really had set out to search for his missing mother. It wasn’t just a sob story; it had actually happened. Now that I’d worked a job with the kid, I was pretty sure of all that.

Still, a part of me wanted very badly to call him a fraud. I guess there was something about Rudeus I just couldn’t tolerate. Or maybe it was just too humiliating to face the fact that a rich kid had saved my life.

“Hmph. It didn’t seem like that job was much of a challenge for him, anyway. I’m sure he’ll turn tail and run the second he’s in any *real* danger.” Pointedly ignoring Suzanne’s words, I burrowed into bed and turned my back on her.

For some reason, I felt incredibly frustrated.

Chapter 3: Quagmire Rudeus

“Huff...huff...”

Panting softly, I jogged along the streets of Rosenburg in the pre-dawn gloom. I could see my breath in the air, and the roads were covered in a barely visible layer of frost. Every stride I took was accompanied by a small “crunch” and a pleasant crackling under my feet. As I lost myself in running, the city seemed to stream past me all on its own.

“Phew...” I finally slowed to a stop when I arrived back at my inn. Breathing heavily, I looked down and murmured “How did you like the run today, boys?” to my trembling calves. Incidentally, I’d recently named my right leg Tindalos and my left leg Baskerville. I wanted to inspire them to grow as quick and nimble as a pair of bloodhounds.

“Oh yeah? Heh. Good boys. Good boys!”

Both of my pups were cavorting happily at the moment, so I paused to pet them a little. I always made sure to follow up our walks with a nice, thorough massage. Healing magic was out of the question; spells could numb the muscle pain, sure, but they couldn’t convey my gratitude. “That was a great effort today, guys,” I whispered, gently squeezing my aching calves between my fingers.

The more love I showed these two, the more love they’d offer me in return. My muscles, at least, would never betray me. They always repaid my affection in kind. Of course, our relationship would fall apart quickly if I hurt them badly or stopped giving them attention. I had to treat them both with the utmost care. But if I ever landed myself in a real mess, our bonds would prove invaluable.

“Whoops. Don’t worry, I didn’t forget about you two.”

Now that I was done with my legs, I turned my attention to my arms. My right was now “Hulk,” and my left one went by “Hercules.”

I was hoping this might encourage them to mature into a pair of brawny monsters. I made a point of giving these boys some attention after seeing to my legs. As a magician, I didn't have to rely on the strength of my arms *that* often, but it did come in handy every once in a while. People use their arms for all sorts of things; if you don't work on them at all, you'll come to regret it sooner or later.

Hulk and his brother were very jealous, and thanks to their excellent connections, they'd know right away if I was planning to neglect them. Last thing I needed was for the boys to start sulking. "Okay, let's try a hundred push-ups. Starting from the top..."

I stretched out face-down on the floor and began to raise and lower my body at a leisurely pace. Hitting an arbitrary number wasn't really the important thing here, of course; the goal was to train my muscles. Soon enough, Hulk and Hercules were quivering with joy. I murmured words of encouragement and pushed them even harder.

This wasn't easy for me, but it was tough on them as well. Still, the memories of our common struggle would bring us closer together—and make us stronger.

"Phew...okay, there we go. Nice work, guys..."

Once I finished up, I massaged and iced my aching muscles while offering them a few words of gratitude. Hulk and Hercules both seemed contented. I'd clearly earned myself a few more affection points today. Another solid workout on the books. Excellent.

After cleaning myself off thoroughly in the bath, I offered my usual prayer to the altar I'd set up in one corner of my room. "Well, then... Please watch over me today, Master."

I removed my holy relic from its shrine, folded it carefully and slipped it into my pocket. Ordinarily, removing such an artifact from its resting place would be an act of blasphemy, but I couldn't risk it being stolen. It was common sense not to leave any truly valuable objects lying around in a rented room.

“Okay. Hopefully there’s a decent job or two on the board...”

Having changed into my robe, I left the inn behind and headed for the guild.

Several months had passed since my arrival in this city. Apart from restarting my physical training, I’d been working to establish myself as an adventurer, following my initial plan.

“Hey, Quagmire! Thanks again for yer help the other day!”

“Always nice having you to lean on, kid.”

“Yeah, your timing with those support spells is really something. I think I learned a thing or two.”

All things considered, it felt like I’d gotten off to a pretty decent start. “I should be thanking you, everyone. I was just helping out a little. Things only went so well because of your talents.”

“Heh. Yer too modest, kid! After all the work you put in, I was expecting some trash talk.”

“Hell, we’d let you into our party for good, if you wanted.”

“Uh, well, I—”

“Hey! We ain’t supposed to recruit him, remember?”

“Whoops. My bad.”

“Ahaha...”

I was still essentially operating as a solo adventurer. Whenever I saw a party debating whether they should take a challenging job, I approached them and offered my services as a mercenary. Over the last few months, I’d helped out many different groups. My asking price was one-tenth of the monetary rewards, in addition to a fifty percent cut on whatever loot I could carry back. The Adventurers’ Guild apparently frowned on these sorts of temporary arrangements,

but I wasn't breaking any actual rules, and so far, they were letting it slide.

The people staffing this branch had presumably heard that I'd "lost" my party and was searching desperately for my mother. I had a feeling they were taking it easy on me out of sympathy. If I moved to a new city, I'd probably need to start joining the parties I worked for on a temporary basis. At the moment, though, I still wasn't comfortable with the idea of adding a new party name to the bottom of my card—even for a few days.

"Anyway, we made a good call bringing you along, kid. Lookin' forward to workin' with you again!"

My general strategy was to behave in a modest, friendly way, while also making my presence felt in combat. It was working well enough so far. My name was relatively well known around Rosenberg at this point.

"Hey, Quagmire!" called a voice as I walked further into the room.

"Oh, it's Quagmire!" shouted another. "Come give us a hand, man! We were just about to head out!"

"Thanks for the offer, guys, but I'm just looking around today."

On second thought, maybe my *actual* name wasn't that well known. Most people seemed to know me by the nickname "Quagmire." It was understandable, since I tended to cast nothing but that spell in battle. Sometimes I'd throw in other support magic like Deep Mist when the situation called for it.

In any case, most of the adventurers in this Guild now smiled at the sight of my face. Doing my best imitation of Timothy seemed to be paying off, and it didn't hurt that I presented myself as a naïve, obliging young magician who didn't know the value of his own services. It's easy to be well-liked when you make yourself that useful.

Still, the regulars here recognized me and knew my name. At this rate, it wouldn't take too long for a few rumors about me to spread through the city as a whole.

"Hey, Quagmire! We're leaving town today. I'll send word if I hear anything about your mother out there, all right?"

"Oh. Thank you, I really appreciate that."

I'd also managed to convince a few travelling parties like this one to keep their eyes open for Zenith when they moved along and left Rosenburg behind. All in all, things were going smoothly enough. Assuming my mother was somewhere in this neighborhood, she'd hear something about me sooner or later.

That was a big assumption, of course. But I didn't feel like I was wasting my time here either way. Once I figured out a good routine in Rosenburg, I could easily do the exact same thing in other cities. If I hopped from one town to the next, moving steadily eastward through the Northern Territories, I could spread the word throughout this entire region. I'd stumble over Zenith eventually.

It had taken me three months to get to this point, but I was finally starting to feel like I was making some actual headway. If I wanted to be thorough, I might need to spend a year or so in every city that I stopped in. In other words, my plan might take a very long time to carry out.

Still...I had to keep moving forward, one step at a time. *Isn't that right, Roxy?*

"Hey, look. He's praying again!"

"Leave it alone. Quagmire's just a pious kid. I saw him goin' at it in the middle of the street the other day..."

Whoops. That was careless of me.

At some point, I'd reached into my pocket and bowed my head in a reflexive prayer. As long as I had my holy relic, I'd be all right. I

could endure anything the world threw at me. With Roxy watching over me, nothing could harm me. I was invincible. I was Mecha-Rudeus, the indestructible!

“Pfft.”

“*Quagmire Rudeus?* Gimme a damn break.”

“That kid’s so full of himself...”

Naturally, there were also a few people who didn’t think too favorably of me. But I wasn’t about to let that bother me, since they weren’t actively interfering with my activities. As long as I maintained my docile, submissive attitude, I’d keep a solid majority of the Guild on my side. In a perfect world, I would eventually win over the minority who disliked me, too, but for now, I just avoided them instead.

“Oh...” Just as I was about to leave the Guild, I found myself face-to-face with an acquaintance of mine. It was Sara, to be specific.

She grimaced at the sight of me. Not the best feeling in the world. “What are you looking at?”

“Uh, nothing.”

Our relationship hadn’t changed much over the last few months. I’d clearly gotten on her bad side from the outset, and her tone of voice never seemed to get any less aggressive.

“You heading back to the inn or something?”

“Uh, yes. I just finished up a job yesterday, so I was planning to get some rest tonight.”

“Fine. We were just about to take a new job ourselves. You want to tag along?”

“Oh. Hmm...”

Counter Arrow regularly invited me to join them on their jobs, probably because of my performance on our first outing together. I worked with them more than any other party. Given my overall goal,

repeatedly teaming up with a single group wasn't particularly efficient. Once I established a good relationship with a party and told them about my objective, there was little new benefit to repeatedly tagging along with them.

"Uh...will you be heading out tomorrow?"

And yet, for some reason, I found it hard to turn Counter Arrow down. I wasn't entirely sure why. Maybe I wanted to repay them for helping me identify some of my weaknesses.

Sara frowned irritably. "You're always so damn reluctant about it. If you don't want to come, you can just say so. It's not like we're begging for your help or anything."

As always, the girl's tone was chilly. Still, I felt like her attitude was *slightly* better than it had been at the very beginning. The open hostility I'd sensed from her at first wasn't in play as much anymore. Not that we were buddies now or anything...

It didn't matter, anyway. I didn't need everyone in this city to like me.

"Sorry about that. I'm just an indecisive person, I suppose. It takes some time for me to make up my mind about anything."

"...Could you stop apologizing for every little thing, too? It's kind of pathetic."

Judging from the mildly exasperated look on Sara's face, she was expressing her actual thoughts rather than trying to hurt my feelings. Still, I wasn't going to change my behavior just because she found it "pathetic." I'd already decided to stick with a painfully polite attitude for the immediate future.

"Cut it out, Sara," called a voice from the entrance.

The other members of Counter Arrow had followed Sara into the Guild. Suzanne was at the head of the group, followed closely by Timothy in his red robe. Patrice and Mimir brought up the rear.

“Fine, whatever,” Sara muttered, pouting as she turned her face to the side.

“What do you say, Rudeus?” asked Suzanne with a smile. “You coming along?”

I paused for a moment. Although I called myself indecisive, I’d actually already made up my mind on this one. For some reason, I just wanted to act like I was unsure. “Yes. I’ll come with you, if you’ll have me.”

“Sounds good! Let’s just pick out a job today, then.”

“Sure.”

If you ignored Sara’s bad attitude, Counter Arrow was easy to work with. I liked being around them. Suzanne was a caring, considerate person; Timothy was good-natured and sociable. The other two guys kept to themselves, but they were nice enough. The party was well-balanced and they’d learned how to work me into their strategy, so combat usually went very smoothly. They did try to let Sara and the frontline fighters get some experience in every fight, so I had to carefully restrict my spellcasting, but it felt like I was working *with* them, instead of just helping them out.

In other words, I sort of felt like part of the team.

“Okay then, let’s see. We’ve got Rudeus with us this time, so...”

“Hey, Suze! How about this one?”

“Whoa. An A-ranked collection job? Oh, they want a bunch of Snow Drake scales... Hmm. I dunno, Patrice. It sounds a little risky.”

“Yeah, but we’ve got Rudeus, right? Might as well take one that pays well.”

Watching the five of them talking things over in front of the bulletin board put me in a slightly nostalgic mood. Not too long ago, I’d watched Eris and Ruijerd have conversations just like this in guilds

half the world away. Back then, I was the one who made the actual decisions...

“...What d’you think, Rudeus?”

“Hm? Oh. Sure. I think it sounds fine, personally.”

These days, all I had to do was give my opinion when it was asked for. It was a very different role from the one I’d played in Dead End. I didn’t have any authority in this group; I was an outsider, really. I could just say what I thought, and then someone else would make the call. No stress.

“Okay then, I think we’re agreed,” said Suzanne. “Let’s take that job.”

Just like that, the decision was made. The quest wasn’t too different from those we’d tackled in the past, but persistently getting results is part of how you build a reputation. I’d have to give this one my all, just like always.

The next day, I packed my things together and headed out of Rosenberg with the members of Counter Arrow. We were headed to an ancient ruin located about two days due south of the city. I’d never been there before.

For what it was worth, I’d done a little research the previous night. Since our objective was to collect Snow Drake scales, I started off by asking around about them. It turned out that the Snow Drake was a monster only found around these specific ruins, at least in this area. As the name would suggest, it was a lesser kind of dragon with pure white scales. They had no wings, and tended to be three or four meters in size. Instead of soaring through the skies, they nested deep inside caves and dungeons, typically in large groups.

Snow Drakes were powerful creatures, and you usually found them in packs, so they were considered S-ranked threats in combat. But they hated bright light, which meant they didn't venture aboveground very often. Plus, they were relatively docile, rarely attacking anyone unless their nests were threatened. All in all, most adventurers didn't think of them as especially dangerous. They were maybe an advanced A-ranked monster, at worst.

Our job this time was to make our way into their home, the Galgau Ruins, and simply collect any scales we could find lying around there. These scales were superb insulators and were often used in construction—the inhabitants of this region of the world had come up with all sorts of ways to keep out the cold, and for those who could afford them, Snow Drake scales were one of the best. Apart from their firmness and durability, they were a beautiful pure white, with a lovely bluish sheen in the light. You'd often find them tiling bedroom floors in the mansions of the local nobility.

The scales could also be used to make armor or shields. You wouldn't find many ordinary adventurers decked out in gear like that, but an S-ranked veteran might have a piece or two, and the knights of the Duchy of Basherant supposedly wore Snow Drake scale mail. The strongest monsters in this region were tougher than anything else alive on this continent. It was easy to understand why people wanted to craft high-end equipment out of them.

Of course, securing these scales meant barging uninvited into the territory of some very powerful creatures. We had no intention of launching an attack on the Snow Drakes' nest, but these ruins were home to many other monsters...and while the Drakes were usually docile, they could always decide to attack us out of nowhere. Everyone seemed a little bit on edge as we made our way down south.

Once we reached the ruins, we made camp outside and held our usual group meeting to review the plan.

“I brought Wyrmbone arrows along for this one, but I’m not sure they’ll get through Snow Drake scales.”

“Hmm. I suppose we should try poison as well.”

“They don’t like bright light, yeah? Could we scare ’em off with fire magic?”

“If that was enough to scare them, they wouldn’t be borderline S-ranked monsters.”

As usual, the members of Counter Arrow took preparations seriously. All of them had gathered information on their own, and tried to figure out how to maximize their contributions. If they were just a little bit more talented as individuals, or had a full party of seven, they could probably have made it to Rank A without much trouble.

To be honest, it was rare to find a party that was this diligent about their work. Most people were kind of winging it out there.

“You haven’t said much of anything, Rudeus. Try not to screw us up in there, okay?”

“Sure. I’ll do what I can.”

“Seriously, you better. I mean, my arrows might not even work on those things... If one of them closes in on you, we might not be able to help...”

Sara definitely seemed nervous about this one. She could fire off arrows with incredible speed and accuracy, but that didn’t mean much against enemies with such tough natural defenses. Although she could find weak points to aim for, like the eyes or mouth, the precision that required put her at a real disadvantage—especially against larger groups of enemies.

And of course, there were quite a few A-ranked monsters that could shrug off an arrow, or even dodge them in midair. The Snow Drakes were definitely in that category. The other monsters that

inhabited these ruins mostly weren't too threatening. But if we did find ourselves facing an A-ranked monster, it was hard to tell if Sara could deal much damage. That was clearly frustrating for her.

Still, that was kind of how things went in this line of business. Few adventurers could accomplish much without a party. I wasn't much good on my own, either. When you started getting cocky, it was only a matter of time until you got showed up by someone better. And when you thought you'd figured out how the world works, it wouldn't be long until it flipped the tables on you. Staying humble was the only way to go.

Sara was still young. She probably hadn't experienced many real setbacks yet, and consequently she seemed more worried about what might happen to the other members of the party if she couldn't perform her role. The fact that she might be in danger herself didn't seem to register.

Of course, the rest of us could always step in to offer a little inconspicuous assistance when she needed it. If that wasn't enough, well...we'd have to cross that bridge when we came to it.

"Don't worry about it too much, Sara," I said. "Our job's to pick up scales, not fight Snow Drakes. We're cleaning up their shed hair for them, basically."

"He's exactly right," said Timothy, nodding gently. "Let's try not to fight them if at all possible."

"If it comes to the worst, we can always make a run for it!" added Patrice.

"You're real good at running away, Patrice. I'll give ya that much," said Mimir.

"Don't be so modest, Mimir," said Timothy. "You're our best sprinter by a long shot."

Everyone burst out laughing, and the tension in the air seemed to lessen just a little. Timothy was a soft-spoken man, but he knew

how to interject a joke or a suggestion when one was called for. That was another thing I wanted to learn to imitate.

“Okay then,” said Suzanne, clapping her hands together. “Shall we get going, folks?”

Everyone rose to their feet, their expressions serious once again.

The entrance to the ruins was located by the banks of a winding mountain stream. It was nothing more than a hole in the cliff face, really. The space inside was half-covered in ice, with thick icicles hanging across the entrance. From above, you could easily overlook it. To be honest, the place looked less like a ruin and more like a cave where bears might hibernate for the winter. It almost felt like we’d come to the wrong place.

However, this did match the general description of the entrance to the Galgau Ruins, which some adventurer had apparently stumbled across ten years ago. But nobody could give me a specific description of the interior, so it was hard to say for sure.

“Is that really it?” said Suzanne dubiously.

“I think it must be,” said Sara, pointing down. “See? There’s some foot traffic out there.”

When I squinted at the snow outside the entrance, I spotted the faint remnants of human footprints. It was hard to tell exactly many people had been here recently, but the place clearly attracted a decent amount of visitors.

“Hmm. Are those fresh footprints? Hope we don’t have a double booking on our hands here...”

“Nah. Those look five or six days old.”

“Still, there’s a chance another party’s still inside.”

“Some of these are headed out of the cave, see? I bet they went home already.”

I half-listened to Sara and Suzanne's conversation as I rummaged through our gear for the equipment we'd need inside the cave. Mainly, this meant the torches we'd prepared in advance. I pulled them out and lit them one by one.

Torches were essential cave exploration tools. Lamps were an option as well, but a blazing torch could act as a makeshift weapon, and kept casting light even if you used it a little roughly. You could toss it aside when a battle began without plunging yourself into darkness. It could be dangerous if you wandered into a chamber full of trapped gases, or lit so many fires that you consumed all the oxygen in the area...but if those sorts of risks bothered you, it was better to stay out of caves in the first place.

That said, it would've been nice to have a brighter, more reliable alternative to these flaming sticks of wood. Maybe something like a sturdy LED lantern?

"The ground's frozen in places, guys. Watch your footing in here."

I handed out the torches to the entire party, starting with Suzanne and working backward. Some parties preferred having only a few designated people carry their torches, but Counter Arrow had everyone take one. We didn't have anyone who could see perfectly in the dark, and since there was a dedicated archer in the group, we wanted the best possible visibility.

Once we entered the cave, the idle chitchat came to an end. Moving in single file, we went down the downward-sloping path in silence, staying alert for any dangers.

There weren't many monsters at the beginning. Sometimes creatures that resembled giant centipedes would pop up and attack, but our vanguard Suzanne took them out easily by herself. Those encounters barely even qualified as combat, really.

Not that I was complaining. The path we were following was so narrow that it would have been seriously awkward to fight an actual swarm of enemies. If monsters started to come at us more frequently, we might have to consider withdrawing...even if they were only concentrated in a few sections of the cave.

The patches of ice on the ground didn't help. We had to pay careful attention to every step we took to avoid falling on our faces. We were all wearing spiked boots, but sometimes that wasn't enough to keep your feet from slipping out under you.

"Ah!"

"Whoops..."

Sara, who was walking right in front of me, lurched abruptly to the side, so I reached out quickly to catch her. My Eye of Foresight did come in handy at times like this. Not that it wasn't useful basically all the time.

"...Are you groping me?"

"Uh, no."



I deposited Sara on a clear patch of ground. Her response was to cover her chest with one arm and glare at me. Her face was flushed, and there was murder in her eyes.

Was she seriously upset that I'd touched her there? I honestly hadn't felt much of anything, except the rigid leather of her chest protector. Maybe it would have gotten my pulse racing back in the day, but I wasn't an innocent little boy anymore, if you know what I mean.

Still, I ultimately decided it was safest to apologize. "Sorry about that."

Putting that nonsense aside... We'd gotten so bunched up that moving along was definitely starting to get a little awkward, but this cave was so narrow that we didn't have much choice. At present, we were moving along in cramped rows of two, with Suzanne and Patrice at the front, followed by Mimir and Sara, with Timothy and me in the rear.

I could still peer over Sara's head when she was in front of me, but since she was a little shorter, it was probably impossible for her to see anything when Patrice was directly in front of her. We'd usually have the middle row staggered in alignment so she could target enemies up ahead, but there just wasn't enough space in this passage. This formation seemed like our only option for the moment. If things got messy, I might have to throw up a wall of earth directly ahead of our front line...

"...Oh."

Just then, the passage we'd been following suddenly came to an end. We'd stepped out into a large, open space, so brightly lit that it almost felt like we were back outside. "Wow..."

I looked up and realized the entire ceiling was covered in patches of something that emitted a bluish-white glow. From this distance, I couldn't tell if it was moss or some sort of mineral, but

whatever the stuff was, it made our torches seem almost unnecessary.

Our path was also much wider than it had been a minute ago. There was suddenly enough space for five people to walk comfortably abreast. Up ahead, a sheer rock face sloped into the darkness on one side of the path. It was hard to make out what lay at the bottom, but it seemed to be some sort of underground lake or river. I had a bad feeling about what might be lurking down there. Falling into it would probably not be the greatest idea.

Further along the path was the place we'd come here to visit: a massive, fort-like structure, crumbling in places but structurally intact.

These were the Galgau Ruins.

"The place served as a fortress during the First Human-Demon War," said Timothy quietly. "Apparently, it was constructed by one of the five greatest Demon Kings of the era. They called him Largon-Hargon the Subterranean."

Hargon, huh? Wonder if he summoned the God of Destruction when they killed him.

"He was a God-tier Earth mage, by all accounts. He would regularly raise fortresses like this one in places no human could possibly find them, then create tunnels to the surface so his forces could launch surprise attacks."

"No kidding? You're really knowledgeable, Timothy."

"Well, the fighting between humanity and the Subterranean Demon King was very fierce in this region, so we have a lot of stories about the war that were passed down through the generations. I remember quite a few of them from my childhood."

Ah. This was all just folk history, then. Still, it seemed plausible. I had no idea how else you could have built a massive fortress like that this deep underground. If what Timothy said was true, this Largon-

Hargon guy could have tunneled his forces upward to attack anywhere at any time, with no warning whatsoever. Defensive walls would have been totally useless. Every human soldier must have been constantly on edge, never knowing when the next assault might come... It was almost bizarre that humanity actually managed to *win* that war.

“Didn’t you say you grew up in Ranoa, Timothy?” said Suzanne, glancing back at us with a slightly curious expression on her face.

“That’s right. I was born in a nameless village there, and spent my formative years in the city of Sharia. You might know it for its University of Magic. Eventually, I headed down to Asura to pursue my dream of becoming a great adventurer...which is how I ended up where I am today, a much humbler man.”

The Kingdom of Ranoa, huh? I guess I’ll probably end up going there myself eventually...

At this point, our conversation was rudely interrupted. “We’re under attack!” shouted Sara, dropping her torch and grabbing for her bow.

I looked ahead and spotted a group of flying black shapes flapping toward us at considerable speed. Each of them looked to be a meter or so in size.

“Giant Bats!”

“Get in formation!” shouted Suzanne immediately. “Leave this to our backline!”

Patrice stepped protectively in front of me; Suzanne and Mimir moved to form a human wall in front of Sara and Timothy.

We were up against flying monsters this time. While there was some space to maneuver now, we had to be careful, given that we weren’t too far from the edge of a cliff. It was safest for our vanguard to simply absorb the bats’ attacks while the three of us shot them down from behind.

“Yaaah!” Sara wasted no time in firing off her first shot. Her arrow homed in on one of the swiftly moving bats, piercing it right through the head; its body spun into the darkness at the bottom of the cliff. It was always impressive to watch her work. The girl was an artist with that bow.

“May this small, smoldering fire call forth a great and searing blessing! *Flamethrower!*”

Timothy’s approach was a bit less subtle. He pointed both hands at the sky and unleashed a wide-range fire spell that sent two Giant Bats spiraling down to their doom.

“Blast Wind!”

I went for an even more basic method, lifting my hands and setting off a powerful explosion in mid-air. Given the moderate size of these bats, I’d figured the shockwave would be enough to disable them. Just as I’d hoped, the explosive wind tore holes in their wings; it was enough to keep them from flying properly. Watching the surviving bats fluttering slowly down toward the lake, I breathed a small sigh of relief...which caught in my throat a moment later.

“Whoa...”

“Ugh!”

An enormous frog had popped out of the water down below and swallowed one of the bats in a single gulp. The men of the party looked on with something like wonder; Sara, on the other hand, grimaced in disgust.

The amphibian was a vivid blue-and-black thing that reminded me of the poison dart frogs back in my world. I had to assume it wasn’t safe to eat. From this distance it was hard to say exactly how big it was, but given how easily it had eaten that Giant Bat, I had to assume it was at least five meters tall. And it was energetic for its size, too. I could see it glancing eagerly all around, wondering if any more prey might tumble down into its lair. If the thing could be this

active in such intense cold, it had to be remarkably tough, even for a monster.

“Let’s try not to fall down there, huh?” muttered Suzanne.

Sara just nodded vehemently. I could see goosebumps on her skin.

Somehow, I got the sense our archer wasn’t a frog person. I thought the big amphibian had a somewhat charming face, but to each their own. That said, I’d run into more than a few frog-faced people on the Demon Continent. It was something Sara would have to get over one of these days.

“Let’s hurry forward, everyone,” called Timothy. “Watch your footing carefully.”

The six of us set off toward the fortress once again, keeping a careful eye on our surroundings.

Galgau was a truly massive structure. Looking up at it from the vantage point of its entrance was fairly awe-inspiring. The ruined fortress was maybe five stories in height, and as wide across as your average middle school. It was impossible to say how far back it went, since it seemed to be partially buried in the rock behind it. At a guess, though, its depth was probably even more impressive. It wasn’t the biggest building I’d seen in this world, but its impact was definitely enhanced by the fact that it was somehow sitting underground. Had a single person seriously created this thing with earth magic?

Our entry point into the ruins wasn’t the front gate. The way in took us through something that might have been a side door, or possibly just a hole in the wall. From there, we had a genuinely spectacular view of the cavern around us. To the left was the winding cliff road we’d followed down here; to the right was an enormous open space with a quiet, dark lake at its bottom.

The world I came from had its share of spectacles, of course, but there weren't many that could compare to this. The only place you'd find anything comparable was in a video game or a piece of fantasy art. And of course, actually being here was very different from looking at an illustration. I could smell the cave, feel the stagnant air, and hear the occasional splash of a giant frog hopping through the water below. The tangible *reality* of it sent a little shiver down my spine. Gazing out at the vast underground lake, I found myself wondering what would happen to anyone who tried to take a swim down there.

"You just gonna stand there looking around all day or what?" asked Sara.

"Oh. Sorry, I'm coming," I said, hurrying back to my spot in our formation.

"Do you like big buildings or something?"

"Not really. I just haven't seen many places like this before, you know?"

"Hmm."

We were on the job right now. I might have been tempted to take a few shots if I had a camera, but there was no time for that sort of thing. I needed to get these scales collected and get back to town as soon as possible.

Yeah. Let's hurry back...to my lonely, empty room in the inn...

I shook my head to clear it of unpleasant thoughts and turned my attention to the ruined fortress itself. "This thing's been here ever since the First Human-Demon war, huh...?"

After all the time I'd spent travelling the Demon Continent, I'd seen my fair share of buildings constructed by demonkind. That included quite a few large, peculiar-looking castles and forts, including Kishirisu Castle in the city of Rikarisu. This fortress did bear some resemblance to them, but it was clearly older, and made a

slightly different impression from the ones I'd seen so far. Maybe that made sense, though, since this was a functional outpost built to be used in an actual war. Everything about it was large in scale; the ceilings were nearly five meters overhead. But oddly enough, the passages tended to be disproportionately narrow.

The height made sense, at least. Demons could be physically very different from human beings, which included being taller on average. As for the narrow hallways...maybe it was a deliberate attempt to make the place easier to defend?

"Hmm...take a right at the next fork, Suze."

"Got it."

I was slightly surprised to realize that Timothy was carrying an actual map of the ruins in one hand. Adventurers did seem to visit this place on a regular basis, so I guess it wasn't surprising someone had put in the effort to map the layout.

"Good lord," Timothy muttered, sighing softly. "What were the demons *thinking* when they designed this place?"

A glance at the map was enough to see that these ruins were something of a maze. It looked a little bit like the scribbles of a kid who preferred his labyrinths to be tangled and nonsensical because they "looked cooler" that way. Given what I knew about Demonkind, that might have been part of the motivation here, but...

"Well, they're not built like us, you know? This might have been more convenient for them, somehow."

"Hmm, I suppose you might be right..."

Even in an underground fortress like this, they'd presumably balanced their forces with a variety of demons, including some who could fly and others who could crawl on the walls. That might explain the tall ceilings and narrow hallways, as well as the weirdly complex layout. Like...what if the holes in the ceiling that looked like ventilation shafts actually led to passages that only wall-crawling

demons could use? Having some passages that only demons could possibly make use of would have given them a major advantage against any humans who made their way inside.

In any case, it felt like a really long time since we'd seen a monster. Everything I'd heard around town led me to believe that these ruins were populated with plenty of bug and amphibian-type creatures, but we hadn't come under attack even once since entering the fortress itself. There were bones lying around here and there, sometimes still stained with blood, but the monsters themselves were nowhere to be seen.

But of course, that didn't mean we could let down our guard.

Suddenly, a long gust of wind blew past us with an eerie whistle. And for some reason, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

"We're under attack!" Mimir shouted instantly.

I looked ahead, behind, and to either side, but didn't spot anything that looked like a threat. "Where are they?!"

"At your feet!"

As it turned out, the enemy was *below* us.

Those bones I'd noticed scattered all around the path were slowly rising up off the ground, rattling as they moved. We had some boney boys on our hands. Or Skeletons, if you prefer.

As they began to piece themselves together, a partially translucent...*thing* appeared further along the corridor, wafting slowly toward us. It was a slender humanoid figure, but it didn't have a head or legs. Clad in a beat-up old robe, it floated toward us weightlessly, as if swimming through the air itself. I wasn't an expert or anything, but that had to be some kind of ghost.

"We've got Skeletons *and* a Wraith, boss!"

"Draw them in close, Patrice!"

"Right!"

“Sara, Timothy, Rudeus, watch our back! Focus on the Skeletons!”

“Okay!”

I spun and found that a number of Skeletons carrying rusty old swords were already coming at us from behind. They could actually move surprisingly fast.

“Out of the way!” shouted Sara, pushing her way past me and Timothy to a forward position. She’d shouldered her bow and drawn a large knife instead.

“Skeletons are weak to blunt-force attacks, Rudeus!” called Timothy.

“That’s my specialty!” I pointed both my hands at the onrushing skeletons. If blunt force was enough to take them down, this wouldn’t be too bad at all.

“Stone Cannon!”

My favorite lethal projectile smacked into the first Skeleton in line and pulverized it; the stone kept moving, destroying a second Skeleton as well.

“Answer my call, God of Obscurities, and shatter my enemy! *Stone Cannon!*”

A split-second later, Timothy fired off his own Stone Cannon, which smashed through a single Skeleton before stopping.

Guess I win this round... Not that it’s a competition or anything.

“All right, we’re all done back here. Let’s—”

“Not yet!”

Just as I was spinning around to support Suzanne and the others, Timothy’s urgent cry turned me back. A skeleton was taking shape before my eyes. The same ones I’d shattered were somehow slowly piecing themselves back together.

“As long as that Wraith is alive, the Skeletons are immortal!”

Oh. Right. Of course.

Skeletons were immortal creatures. You could smash them apart and set them on fire, and they’d still come at you while they burned. Char them to ashes, and they’d still piece themselves back together. Blunt-force attacks were the simplest way to render them incapable of movement, but that was only a temporary measure. While you had them disabled, you had to take out the Wraith that was animating them. Fire magic could burn away a Wraith, but that didn’t do much except buy you a little time. Like the skeletons it controlled, it would come back eventually.

Divine magic was by far the most effective answer to a Wraith. It could erase their spectral forms much more quickly and thoroughly than any fire spell; and a Wraith defeated in that way was gone for good. Additionally, Skeletons hit by Divine spells turned into particles of light and permanently disappeared. But as long as the Wraith itself stayed intact, it could summon an endless supply of new ones.

“I call upon thee, God who blesses the land which nurtures us! Deliver divine punishment to those foolish enough to defy the natural ways! *Exorcistrate!*”

Evidently, Mimir had trained in this school of magic.

I glanced over my shoulder at the sound of an unfamiliar incantation and saw the ball of light Mimir had summoned smack into the Wraith’s spectral body.

“Gyyeeeeeeaaaaa!” With an ear-splitting shriek, the ghost disappeared. Its partially transparent body burst apart and was reduced to small motes of light, which soon faded into oblivion. Instantaneously, the Skeletons fell apart, their bones crumbling lifelessly to the ground.

“Okay, we’re good!” called Suzanne. “Back in formation, everyone!”

Sara turned and jogged past me to take up her normal position in the middle; Mimir joined her, and we were back to our initial arrangement. That fight had been a little unsettling, but at least I'd gotten to see a new spell for the first time.

"That's the first time I've ever seen Divine magic...or a ghost, for that matter," I said quietly, looking over at Timothy.

"It's only the second time I've seen a Wraith myself," he replied. "The first time, my party was completely clueless, and it got one of our friends killed. That was a very painful lesson."

"Was Mimir not with you at that point?"

"No. This was well before we formed Counter Arrow. I made a point of having us practice for this scenario, though. I'm very glad I did."

Sara looked over her shoulder at us and put a finger to her lips. Our conversation was probably making it harder for her to listen for threats.

"Sorry about that," I whispered. This was definitely not the place or time for casual chit-chat. In a place like this, carelessness could get you killed in no time at all.

In any case, apparently this ruin was haunted on top of everything else. That was more than a little disturbing. Judging from its appearance, that ghost might have been a warrior in life... Could it have been a soldier from the First Human-Demon War?

No, that seemed really unlikely. Surely a ghost from such a distant past wouldn't still be hanging around in a place that people visited fairly regularly. It had probably been an adventurer who'd died in here within the last few years. *My condolences, buddy. Hope you rest in peace.*

"Ah, good. Here we are!"

Suzanne's voice brought me back to reality. I realized we'd finally emerged from that winding maze of corridors into a larger, more open space. We seemed to be in a wide hallway maybe a hundred meters long. A crumbled set of stairs in the middle led to the second floor, and both sides of the passage were lined with giant stone sculptures. It felt pretty obvious that some important part of the fortress lay just ahead.

"Oh wow..."

And then there was the floor.

It was practically covered in a carpet of beautiful white scales, almost like the petals of a cherry blossom tree in bloom. These had to be the Snow Drake scales that we were here for. Considering their value, there certainly were a *lot* of them just lying around.

Based on the research we'd done beforehand, this hall was part of the route the Snow Drakes used to move from their nest to their hunting grounds. They often stopped here to groom themselves while moving through the area. It was well-known as the single best place to find their scales in the entire complex.

"Beyond this hall, we'd be stepping into the Snow Drakes' territory," called Suzanne from up ahead. "Don't go any further than that last statue in the line back there. Is that clear, everyone?"

Mimir and Patrice shouted "Yeah!" in unison, then set to work scooping up scales.

We'd carefully planned out this part of the operation in advance. Along with Sara and Timothy, I was supposed to keep watch for threats from every direction. The Snow Drakes were known to emerge from the far end of this hallway, and sometimes other monsters would pop out from the second floor or the corridor we'd just passed through. We were on the lookout for Giant Bats, Red-Eyed Moles, Myconids, and Wraiths, mainly.

If the Snow Drakes themselves appeared, we'd duck back into the passage or hide behind cover. If the other monsters appeared, we'd just alert the others and eliminate them. In the meantime, the rest of the party would gather as many scales as humanly possible. Once we filled up all six of the sacks we'd brought, we'd have more than enough to turn in back at the Guild.

This could get very dangerous if we somehow ended up in combat with the Snow Drakes...but aside from that possibility, this job was honestly so simple that it barely felt worthy of its A-rank rating. I had expected us to run into many more enemies on our way in here. There seemed to be oddly few monsters around today. That Wraith was the only real threat we'd run into.

For some reason, that actually made me a little uneasy. I had to make sure not to let my guard down.

With that thought in mind, I focused my attention on the direction of the Snow Drakes' nest. The last statue in the hallway depicted a voluptuous woman with her legs planted far apart—a woman wearing nothing but hot pants, a breast protector, and a cape. She held her hands at her hips...and for some reason, there were chains on them. I felt a little sad that her head had fallen off at some point over the centuries.

There was a door between that statue's legs. A little further down that passage was apparently where the Snow Drakes lived, so it was presumably where they'd be coming from if they made an appearance.

Not that it really mattered, but that statue's clothing felt weirdly familiar.

Oh! Hold on, is that supposed to be Kishirika Kishirisu?! The last time I saw her, she looked more like a little kid than a buxom babe, but...maybe? No, no, that can't be right... Hmm.

Then again, statues like this tended to exaggerate how impressive people were, right? It wouldn't be surprising if the sculptor had taken a little artistic license. Still, this seemed a bit *too* exaggerated. Especially in the height department. And the bust department.

Hmm...those things were just huge...

"Whoops. There I go again..."

Focus, Rudeus. Focus. I needed to be ready and waiting if enemies popped up out of nowhere or something.

Still, the sight of a gigantic pair of breasts no longer got me quite as excited as it once did. Maybe it was because I'd actually touched some real ones. My innocence was gone forever...

"What's that sound?!" Timothy shouted.

An instant later, piercing cries from somewhere in the distance reached my ears.

"I've got a bad feelin' about this one, boss..."

"Get ready for combat, everyone!" shouted Suzanne. "Push the bags over to the side!"

Unfortunately, Mimir's apprehension proved to be warranted. The six of us bunched into a tight formation, looking around for the enemy. The cries echoing through the hallway were coming from somewhere deeper in the ruins, and they were gradually getting louder. Tense and uncertain, we exchanged glances with each other.

From the sound of it, there were a *lot* of monsters shrieking. If we were about to get hit by a giant horde of enemies, it would be smartest to just grab the scales we'd managed to collect and beat a hasty retreat. Mimir, Patrice, and Suzanne had filled an entire bag by now; that was probably enough to meet the bare minimum requirement for our task.

For a few long moments, Suzanne listened carefully to the cries, and then considered the scales and our half-filled sacks. “It doesn’t sound like they’re heading our way,” she finally said. “I think we should probably keep gathering, but quickly.”

It didn’t seem like an unreasonable opinion. The cries were still far off, and it didn’t feel like they were coming *right* at us. Maybe someone else had gotten the Snow Drakes whipped up into a frenzy, but that might be just the distraction we needed to finish collecting their scales.

Still, that was just one possibility. There was also a very good chance we might get mixed up in whatever this was. Was it smarter to play this safe and cut our profits, or take the risk to pursue a greater reward?

Either way, every second we spent standing around waiting was only putting us in greater danger. There was a chance nothing at all would happen, true; but no matter what course of action we wanted to take, we needed to make up our minds quickly.

“I think we should finish up, too,” offered Sara.

“Yeah, I’m on board,” said Mimir.

“We’re almost done anyway, right?” said Patrice.

That put a solid majority of the party on Suzanne’s side. To be honest, I preferred the idea of running away. But unlike the others, I wouldn’t face any consequences for failing this mission. Since I wasn’t a member of their party, I wouldn’t be responsible for paying the fee from the Guild. Since I didn’t have any skin in the game, it was hard for me to say anything.

“All right then,” said Timothy quietly. “We’ll gather the scales for a little longer. But let’s be quick about it.”

With that, everyone hurriedly resumed their previous tasks. All of us were much more alert than before, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that those shrieking cries were only getting louder and more

violent. Clutching my staff tightly, I stared at the stone statue at the far end of the hall.

The cries were still distant. If the pack was heading for us, they'd probably be coming from that direction...but for some reason, I felt like I could hear them from behind us as well. Maybe they were just echoing around inside the ruins.

Could I just use earth magic to seal off all the entrances except the one we'd taken? No. That was a bad idea. If the monsters came flooding in through there, then we'd really be in trouble.

Calm down, Rudeus. You don't even know what's going on yet. Anything you do right now might backfire.

Fortunately, none of us were worn out yet. Even if we got in trouble, we had the energy to fight our way out of it, which was likely the only reason Suzanne had chosen to take this risk in the first place. The only thing I had to worry about was killing the monsters if they did appear. Nice and simple.

I waited for the others to finish up, trying to keep my mind as clear as possible, trying to ignore the fearsome shrieks that sent shivers down my spine.

"...Hm?"

Just as we were filling up the last of our bags, the monsters' shrieks began to grow fainter and fainter. Suzanne looked up and peered suspiciously in the direction of the fading sound.

Maybe we'd all been worried about nothing. Maybe those were just the Snow Drakes' mating cries, or something? Some animals get really noisy when they go into heat. Maybe we'd stopped by in the middle of their courtship rituals.

Relaxing slightly, I started to loosen my grip on my staff...

"Oh crap! They're on us!"

In that instant, a flood of sleek white shapes exploded past the statue with ferocious speed. They rushed between its feet and clambered down from the space where its head had been. At a glance, they resembled enormous, pure-white geckos.

They were Snow Drakes. And within seconds, there were more of them in the chamber than I could count.

As they rushed forward, their bloodshot eyes found our little party, and the first few came to a sudden halt just before they reached us. I counted six of them. There were many more, of course, but my field of vision could only hold that many.

It had all happened so very suddenly. Timothy was frozen in place, just like the rest of us. He couldn't even shout the word "Retreat."

However, our scaly friends seemed to be reacting the exact same way. I'd never seen a startled lizard before, but this was probably what one looked like. Their eyes opened wide, they froze, and opened their mouths halfway to threaten us with their fangs.

For one long instant, it felt like time had ground to a halt.

And then, I finally managed to shout the word "*Run!*"

Timothy and the others spun around and sprinted toward the exit like they'd been shot out of a cannon. "Gaaaaah! Not agaaaaain!"

Perhaps provoked by Patrice's mournful shrieking, the Snow Drakes began to move as well.

"Earth Fortress!"

I threw up a massive wall of earth in their path, blocking their progress. It was a solid, thick barrier, reaching all the way to the shoulder of the nearest stone statue. Figuring that I'd bought us all a little time, I turned around and headed for the exit myself.

But when I glanced over my shoulder a moment later, I couldn't help but let out a shrill little yelp of terror. The Snow Drakes were essentially lizards—a simple wall, even a tall one, was basically meaningless to them. One by one, they were climbing over it and slithering through the small gaps on either side.

This was not good at all. At this rate, they were going to catch up and surround me. Thanks to my daily jogging, I wasn't out of breath yet, but that didn't mean much. I wasn't a fast runner by any means.

"Gah!" I spun back around and pointed my hands at the Snow Drakes. *These things are lizards, right? How do you kill a lizard? Would intense cold work? Maybe it'll slow them down, at least!*

"Blizzard Storm!"

Acting mostly on reflex, I tried an ice spell. Gusts of freezing wind rushed through the air, sending scales flying off the ground. A moment later, spears of ice thick as a man's thigh sliced toward the Snow Drakes that had made it past my wall.

The monsters weren't far away, and they didn't have much room to maneuver. But somehow, they managed to avoid most of the spears with quick, agile movements of their bodies. The few projectiles that did strike home weren't effective, either—they just bounced off the Snow Drakes' scales instead of penetrating them.

I'd chosen my magic poorly. Snow Drake scales were natural insulators, and they lived in a frigid region of the world. Of *course* an ice spell wouldn't work on them.

My wall of earth broke apart. More slithering white bodies pushed their way through the crumbling rubble. I saw at least a dozen of them in that first wave alone. They were bearing down on me as a group now, in large numbers. Earlier I'd only seen a few at once, but they'd bunched up as my wall slowed the front ranks

down. Every single one of them moved as quickly and nimbly as a tiny lizard, despite their massive size.

This was *not* good. I couldn't hope to run anymore. I had to fight. I had to fight them off, somehow, while I retreated. Could I possibly pull that off? Probably not.

Had the others managed to escape, at least?

At least I'd left a letter in my room at the inn in case something like this happened. When an adventurer died, someone from their party usually dealt with the things they left behind. I wasn't an official member of Counter Arrow, of course, but maybe they'd at least send that message off for me...

I reached my left hand into my pocket and tightly squeezed the scrap of fabric inside it. As the Snow Drakes bore down on me, I tried to brace myself for the inevitable.

"Yah!"

In that moment, I heard a voice from behind me...and an arrow zipped past, lodging itself in the eye of the nearest Snow Drake.

"Gryaaaaaaah!" Shrieking at the top of its lungs, the lizard stumbled off to the side and smashed into one of the stone statues that lined the hallway. It rushed forward and past us, pressing its body tightly against the side wall of the passage.

"May this small, smoldering fire call forth a great and searing blessing! *Flamethrower!*"

A line of flame roared past me on the left; and an onrushing Snow Drake came rearing to an abrupt halt, rather than running through it.

"Let's do this, Patrice!"

"Yeah!"

Suzanne pushed past me, flanked on either side by Patrice and Mimir. Suddenly, there were three people in the vanguard, and three in the rear. And I was in the very middle of the formation.

“These things aren’t after us! Just hit the ones charging this way and knock them off course!”

“Gotcha!”

“More coming in from the left!”

Calling out instructions to each other, the vanguard squared off against the horde of frenzied Snow Drakes. Sara unleashed a flurry of arrows, and Timothy fired bursts of flame in all directions.

Had they actually come back for me? Why? I wasn’t even a member of their party.

As I stood there dumbfounded, Timothy turned and slapped me on the back.

They really did...come back to save me. The moment I realized that, I felt something warm swelling up inside me.

“...Ugh!”

I forced that feeling back down just as quickly as it came. I wasn’t sure exactly why. I just couldn’t handle it right now. I just...wasn’t ready.

“Don’t just stand there, moron!” snapped Sara, bringing me back to earth. “You’re fighting, too!”

“R-right!”

I aimed my staff at the Snow Drakes and began to channel mana through it. Now that I had a steady frontline holding off the assault for now, I’d managed to calm down slightly. Just as Suzanne said, the Drakes weren’t actively trying to kill us. They did seem to recognize us as dangerous obstacles, but the great majority were opting to avoid us entirely by crawling along the walls or ceilings.

In other words, we didn't have to fight this entire pack of monsters. All we had to worry about were the two or three of them that were charging straight at us in any given moment. And even then, there wasn't any need to kill them. If we dealt a bit of damage, they'd change their course quickly enough. Some animals only got more dangerous and aggressive when they were wounded, but fortunately, these lizards preferred to run for their lives.

Sara's arrows couldn't pierce their scales, and Timothy's magic wasn't strong enough to kill them. Suzanne and Patrice's attacks weren't dealing them any real damage, either. But if all we needed to do was nudge them away from us, we had a chance to survive this onslaught.

"Stone Cannon!"

I fired off spell after spell at the Snow Drakes right in front of me, trying to change their trajectories. A direct hit from my Stone Cannon was powerful enough to shatter the Drakes' scales and pierce their flesh, but even that wasn't enough to kill them. I wasn't sure if it was the distance, or if they were somehow managing to twist their bodies around to limit the damage.

It didn't really matter, though. All I cared about was scaring them off. As long as I convinced them to veer off-course, we could get through this in one piece.

"Okay!" shouted Suzanne. "Let's inch our way over to the wall!"

Little by little, we began to edge our formation sideways. Once we made it to the wall, the Drakes would be coming at us from fewer directions. And if we backed up along it, we could make our way to the exit.

It was impossible to know how long these waves of Snow Drakes would keep coming, but eventually we could at least escape this chamber.

"Graaah!"

All of a sudden, I saw great sprays of blood shooting through the air from somewhere deep inside the waves of Snow Drakes. Something—no, *someone*—was leaping fiercely across the battlefield, killing Snow Drakes in rapid succession.

It wasn't just the one attacker, either. Another small shape appeared at the very back of the hall and began to attack from behind with powerful fire magic. Frenzied with fear, the Snow Drakes rushed to flee the fortress even more desperately than before.

"What, is that all you've got?!" The man at the front of this group—the one who'd roared earlier—cut down one Drake after another, and the people following in his wake rushed to support him.

Apparently, the cavalry had arrived.

I glanced over at Timothy. He nodded before I could say anything. "All right, everyone! Let's press the attack as well!"

"You got it, boss!"

Suzanne stepped forward with a smile, and our counterattack began.

I was the one who brought down the very last of the Snow Drakes.

My Stone Cannon struck home directly at the top of the creature's head, smashing through the skull and spraying its contents in all directions.

"...It's finally over, huh?"

Just to make sure, I looked cautiously around the area. Snow Drake corpses lay in heaps all around the hall. The vast majority of them had been killed by the party that joined in midway, but we'd

brought down a decent handful ourselves. More importantly, none of the creatures seemed to be moving anymore. I made a point of checking the ceiling, upper walls, and every potential hiding spot in the hallway, but I couldn't see anything that looked like a threat.

In the end, my eyes met those of the party who'd appeared from the depths of the ruins. The whole group was looking in our direction. Some carried swords, others shields or staves. They had to be adventurers, of course. The man standing at the very center of the group in a dark blue coat was definitely a swordsman. And judging from his performance just now, he was a *very* good one.

As I looked on, the man in question left his party and strode quickly toward us. He didn't have a particularly friendly face, and the glowering expression on it didn't help matters. Maybe he was still fired up after the battle.

In any case, he'd basically saved our lives. We'd have to express our thanks.

I stepped back, though. At times like these, the party leader usually handled the talking on behalf of the whole group. It was kind of my fault that we'd run into each other, since I'd been too slow to run away, but it just wasn't my place to say anything.

"Hey there. I'm Timothy of Counter Arrow," said Timothy, approaching the man with a friendly smile. "Thanks so much for your—*gah!*"

It all happened in the blink of an eye.

Still scowling fiercely, the man lashed out and punched Timothy in the face, sending him sprawling on the ground. Crying out in anger, Suzanne and Sara drew their weapons.

"Don't give me that dopey smile, asshole!" shouted the man. "You've got some guts, stealing our prey like that!" He glared at Timothy for a moment, then shot an equally furious look at the rest of us. The hostility in his eyes looked nearly murderous.

“Stealing your prey?!” shouted Suzanne. “Are you joking? These things attacked us out of nowhere! *You* got us caught up in this!”

The man let out a harsh snort of laughter. “Oh, please! You snuck in from behind and tried to grab those scales while we were doing all the work!”

“We didn’t even know anyone else was working a job in here!”

“We told the whole damn town we’d be here!”

“Well, *we* didn’t hear anything about it!”

The man was clearly furious at us, and the people behind him seemed upset as well. But it felt like we were kind of talking past each other here.

Now that I saw them up close, though, I did at least recognize them. They were Stepped Leader, an S-ranked adventurer party. They were a highly competent bunch associated with the prominent clan Thunderbolt. I’d heard them called the strongest single party in the entire city of Rosenberg.

This extremely short-tempered man was their leader, naturally. As I recalled, his name was Soldat Heckler. He was supposedly a highly skilled swordsman of the Sword God Style.



“Oh...” Now that I’d remembered this much, something finally clicked home.

Suzanne turned around at the sound of my voice. Everyone else looked my way as well. I couldn’t help flinching slightly. “Rudeus, do you know something about this?”

“Uh...well, come to think of it, I did hear something about Stepped Leader taking on an S-ranked job in the Guild the other day.”

Counter Arrow was out working another job at the time, but...Soldat had been hanging around boasting about their next mission, and promising to tell everyone about his heroic exploits once he returned.

From what I could recall... “I think they were going out to exterminate a large pack of Snow Drakes that appeared in Ilbron Cave...”

“Ilbron Cave?! What?! That’s a full day away from here!” shouted Suzanne.

Soldat scowled furiously. “What the hell? This *is* Ilbron Cave!”

“Are you drunk?! We’re in the Galgau Ruins!”

“Calm down, Suzanne,” said Timothy, rising slowly to his feet.

“Timothy...are you all right?”

“Yes. He was kind enough to take it easy on me. Sara, lower your bow, please.”

Rubbing the area around his neck with one hand, Timothy gestured at Sara with the other. She’d pulled her bow all the way back and looked ready to let an arrow loose at any moment.

“I think I might have a rough idea of what happened here,” he continued with a small sigh, smiling gently at the man who’d just decked him. “I remember hearing that a large number of monsters emerged from Ilbron Cave some time ago, and the party that was

sent to fight them was wiped out. The sole survivor reported that they'd found a nest of Snow Drakes deep inside the cave."

Right. I remembered that part as well.

Ilbron Cave was about a day's travel from Rosenberg. The monsters that inhabited it were mostly D- or E-ranked threats. You could find huge lumps of rock salt deep inside it, so adventurers sometimes ventured out there to retrieve some. Recently, though, news had reached the city that masses of C-ranked monsters had been pouring out of the cave. There was a small town nearby, and it wasn't far from Rosenberg, either. Given the dangers and urgency of the situation, the matter was immediately referred to the Guild.

When the first party sent out to get control of the situation was annihilated, the survivor's account of a Snow Drake pack prompted the Guild to hike the job from B to S-rank. While everyone else in Rosenberg shrunk back, the S-ranked party Stepped Leader (which usually focused on exploring labyrinths) boldly took on the task.

"I thought it was strange that we encountered so few monsters on the way over here, but now it all makes sense. Some natural event must have opened an underground passage between the Galgau Ruins and Ilbron Cave recently, and all the creatures from Galgau rushed over into the cave."

The Galgau Ruins were once the fortress of a Demon King. The castle had served as a base of operations for his army...which dug tunnels from it in all directions, using them to attack humankind. If Ilbron Cave had once been one of those tunnels, then all of this made perfect sense. The path between the two might have been sealed off during the war, or by some sort of cave-in in the centuries since then.

In any case, once the path was reopened, the monsters followed it and poured into Ilbron Cave to feast on weaker prey. That had to be the reason we'd seen almost nothing on our side of the complex.

“So...what? You’re saying you came here on a separate job?”

“That’s right. You can confirm that with the Guild, if you want.”

Soldat grimaced, shook his head, and spat on the ground. “Well, damn. My bad for punching you outta nowhere, then...”

“That’s all right. You were worked up after that battle, and we both misunderstood the situation. I’m sorry as well.”

I felt like we *really* didn’t have anything to be sorry for here, but Timothy apologized anyway. The man had his strategy for success, and he stuck to it.

“Still, these things were our prey. You guys get one corpse; that’s it. Got it?!”

“Of course.”

Timothy agreed to this immediately, but Sara and Suzanne scowled. They didn’t actually complain, though. There was an unwritten rule among adventurers when it came to this sort of thing.

When you got another party mixed up in a fight against a group of monsters, that party only got to take a single one of the resulting corpses afterward. This was intended as a way to discourage parties from deliberately blundering into other people’s fights to secure a share of the loot.

“Once you’ve collected your scales, leave the clean-up to us and head on back to Rosenburg. Don’t worry, we’ll seal that hole in the back of the ruins up good and tight.”

With that said, Soldat turned on his heel and stalked away. The other members of Stepped Leader shrugged and followed him back into the depths of the ruins. They’d probably deal with the corpses in the Snow Drakes’ nest first, then work their way back here collecting all the valuable materials. It wasn’t unfair, really, but it wasn’t a great feeling knowing that they’d profit off the ones we’d managed to kill as well. For one thing, we never would have been in danger in the

first place if they hadn't been around. I felt like we deserved some damages for emotional distress, or whatever.

At the end of the day, though, it definitely wasn't worth arguing about with those guys. So we got to take these mixed feelings home with us instead. Great.

"Okay then. Let's gather up our scales and get out of here." Timothy's smile was a tired one, and his cheek was already starting to swell.

All I could do was sigh and nod.

When we returned to the Adventurers' Guild a few days later, we found a huge pile of Snow Drake claws, scales, and fangs already sitting outside the building. The members of Stepped Leader were still inside, boasting of their recent exploits.

"...So you see, Ilbron Cave and Galgau Ruins had actually gotten themselves connected! If it weren't for us, this town mighta been overrun by rampaging Snow Drakes by now!"

Soldat, in particular, seemed to be really getting into his story. The other adventurers in the room listened with dubious smiles on their faces.

Watching him reminded me of Paul, for some reason. They didn't look anything alike, but I had the feeling my father might have been a bit like this at some point in his younger years.

"Let's get this over with," muttered Suzanne, looking a bit disgruntled.

The other members of Counter Arrow didn't seem inclined to linger, either. We cut across the Guild directly to the counter, turned

in the requested materials to the receptionist, and then headed straight back outside.

“Okay, Rudeus. Here’s your cut for the job. Make sure that looks right.”

“Sure. Thank you very much.”

Timothy had handed me a small bag packed full of Snow Drake scales. The job had left a bad taste in our mouths, but at the end of the day, we’d come away with a very decent payday. Despite everything that went wrong, we managed to bring home even more scales than expected.

Given the number of Snow Drakes that had just been slaughtered, it seemed likely that the market price for their scales would eventually go up later. I was planning to hold onto these for now instead of cashing them in immediately. Hopefully I’d come out ahead in six months or so. I wasn’t using that much money at the moment, but it never hurt to stash away a little more cash for a rainy day.

“All right then, everyone. I’ll see you later.”

“...Rudeus!”

Just as I was turning to walk away, someone called out to me from behind. It was Sara, oddly enough. She’d extended her hand a little in my direction; from the look on her face, it seemed like she had something to say.

To be honest, I was expecting it to be some sort of sarcastic parting shot, but... “Why don’t you come to the afterparty for once?”

“Huh...?”

“You know, the afterparty. We’re just going to the bar.”

It wasn’t that I’d failed to understand the literal meaning of her words, of course. I was just surprised that she’d asked. When a party of adventurers finished a job that lasted several days or more, they

typically headed straight to a bar to drink themselves silly and praise each other for their heroics. It was a way of celebrating the fact that you made it back alive.

I always skipped out on those events. When I got back from a job, my standard procedure was to head back to my inn, offer a few prayers, and then go straight to bed.

The members of Counter Arrow knew that, of course. They knew I always refused. I needed to head back and tell Roxy I'd tried my hardest out there. That was the way I'd done things so far, and I wasn't planning to change up my routine now.

But for some reason, I found myself nodding. "Okay. I guess I'll come along."

"...Seriously?" Sara looked taken aback, even though she'd been the one to extend the invitation. Maybe she'd been planning to hit me with some snappy insult when I shot her down.

"What, am I not welcome after all?"

"Don't be stupid. Come on, let's go."

Instead of scowling at me, she just shook her head in mild exasperation and set off past me down the street. Mimir and Patrice followed, slapping me lightly on the shoulders as they passed, and Suzanne and Timothy pushed me along from behind, looking strangely happy about all of this.

In a bar a good distance from the Adventurers' Guild, the six of us smacked our mugs together.

"Cheers, everyone!"

"Cheers!"

Apparently, this wasn't Counter Arrow's usual bar. I was assuming they'd gone out of their way to reduce their odds of

running into Stepped Leader. Those guys would presumably be holding their own celebration soon enough.

“What? Aren’t you drinking, Rudeus?” said Sara, glancing at my mug.

“...Well, I’m a minor.”

“Uh, okay. What’s that got to do with anything?”

Everyone around me was guzzling booze, but I’d opted for diluted fruit juice instead. It was basically the only non-alcoholic drink you could order in bars around here...unless you were a big fan of goat milk.

“What does it matter if we’re drinking or not?” said Timothy, the one other person who’d gone with the same beverage as me. “What’s important is we’re having fun.”

“Psh. Whatever. You just can’t drink, right?”

“No, I *don’t* drink. There’s a significant difference there, you know.”

“Hahaha!” Mimir burst out laughing as Timothy scratched awkwardly at his neck.

“Oh, good grief...” It seemed Counter Arrow’s esteemed leader was something of a lightweight, and his friends evidently never let him forget it.

Still, it was pretty rare to find someone in this world who didn’t drink. He was probably the first sober adventurer I’d ever met, come to think of it.

“Well, anyway. Let’s just celebrate the fact that we made it out of that mess without losing anyone, shall we? Normally, at least one of us would have died back there.”

“True enough,” said Sara, sounding slightly grumpy. “You were really lucky, Rudeus.”

"I'm not sure if lucky is the word. I mean, I feel like you guys protected me..."

"Yeah, and you're lucky that we did. Most parties would have left you to die."

Hmm. Was this her subtle way of telling me to show some gratitude? Fair enough. I owed them for that one, didn't I? Yeah, for sure.

"Well, I'm very grateful to you," I said, bowing my head slightly.

"Don't thank me," said Sara, pouting slightly and taking a swig of her drink. "Thank Timothy and Suzanne."

Suzanne smirked at this and gave Sara a little nudge with her elbow. "Oh, I don't know. You were the one who went running back there first, weren't you? Mimir said it was a lost cause, but you *insisted* we could make it back for him..."

"Hey! Shut up, Suzanne!" Sara reached out and tried to shove Suzanne away; cackling, Suzanne twisted around to avoid her hand. "Look, you helped us out last time, right? I don't like owing people, that's all."

I nodded and uncertainly averted my eyes from Sara's glare. By sheer coincidence, I ended up meeting Mimir's gaze instead.

"Uh, hey, I'm grateful too, for the record," he said a little awkwardly. "It's not like I wanted to leave you behind or anything, but...you know how it is, right?"

"Yeah. Of course."

Mimir's assessment of the situation had been reasonable. And at the end of the day, he'd jumped in front of me to face down the Snow Drakes, just like all the others. That was more than I could have expected.

"Well, in any case, we all made it back in one piece, and we've got plenty of cash in our wallets. That's what matters, if you ask me!"

Suzanne's words put a smile back on everyone's face, at least for a moment.

"Yeah...it's just a shame we had to run into those jerks at the end."

"What is their *problem*, anyway? I know they're the strongest party in this Guild, but they are so full of themselves."

"They spend all their time crawling around labyrinths! They've got some nerve acting like a bunch of heroes now. If a bunch of Snow Drakes *actually* came running at Rosenberg, the army would have sent out a force to fight them!"

"Personally, I'm still pissed that he punched Timothy out of nowhere like that. What kind of a party leader hits a magician before he's even got his facts straight?"

With the preliminaries over, everyone promptly moved on to complaining bitterly about Stepped Leader. It was probably important for them to vent like this. Timothy had managed to keep things peaceful somehow; the last thing Counter Arrow needed was to let their resentments fester and explode into another fight with Soldat and company.

That said, I didn't really feel like joining in the chorus of complaints. I wasn't a big fan of talking trash about people behind their backs, especially since I'd been a shitty person myself in my previous life. Soldat had his own problems, presumably. He was kind of a jerk, but at least he was working hard and getting things done. That was probably why the other members of his party just shook their heads and went along with his nonsense. He'd definitely bungled that specific situation, but I wasn't ready to dismiss him as an irredeemable piece of garbage just because we got off on the wrong foot.

Of course, it wouldn't be wise to say anything of the sort right now. This wasn't the time to be playing devil's advocate. I had my opinion, but I'd keep it to myself.

Instead of joining the conversation, I focused on my food in silence. The main dish was an odd bean stew of some sort that I couldn't identify. Its slightly spicy flavor stimulated my appetite, and before long, my stomach was comfortably full.

"...Well, anyway. Hope we can work together again soon, Rudeus."

"Yeah. You do come in handy, I guess."

"Oh. Sure. I'm glad to come along again, if you'll have me."

The others had been drinking heavily for a while now. Their faces were flushed, and they seemed to be enjoying themselves very much. I was glad I'd come along. This sort of thing was kind of fun. And I needed some fun in my life to help keep me going.

To be honest, I felt like I was stuck in a rut right now...but I *was* alive, at least. That was something.

"Ah..." Just then, the door to the bar swung open and three men stepped inside. I recognized them immediately. One of them was particularly familiar.

"Oh." They'd spotted me instantly as well.

The leader of the group headed over in my direction with an irritated look on his face. His cheeks were flushed, and he wasn't walking too steadily. It looked as if he'd had a few drinks already.

"Hey there!" The drunken man stopped in front of our table and slammed his hand down onto it.

It was our good friend Soldat Heckler.

"...You want something?" said Suzanne, her voice suddenly cold.

It seemed the others hadn't noticed Soldat come in. Understandably, none of them looked too happy about seeing the man they'd just spent thirty minutes griping about.

"Look, I was...all worked up back in the cave, right? So I thought...I'd come set things straight with you people." Soldat's eyes weren't entirely focused, and his voice came out a little harsh. "I guess...I screwed that up back there. Sorry 'bout that. I didn't realize...what was goin' on, y'know?"

To my surprise, though, his words were actually apologetic. The members of Counter Arrow looked at each other in confusion.

At this point, Soldat frowned and jabbed a finger out at Timothy. "That said...! I don't like your face, man. You smile too much, dammit! It's pathetic! You just let a guy punch you instead of fighting back, and then you don't even complain? I hate that kind of shit. Maybe you were trying to calm things down! Fine! But sometimes, a man's gotta *fight!*"

"Uh...yes, I suppose you're probably right. Suzanne's always telling me the same thing, actually. I'll have to keep that in mind."

"Yeah! You do that! You keep that in mind!" Soldat smacked Timothy on the shoulder a little harder than necessary; Timothy smiled awkwardly and scratched at his head. Suzanne and the others looked on, totally nonplussed. I don't think anybody had been expecting him to defuse the situation like this. I certainly hadn't been.

Nodding in satisfaction, Soldat abruptly turned in my direction. "Quagmire!"

I jerked my head up, somewhat surprised to be mentioned. Had I done something to piss this guy off? "Uh, yes?"

"Timothy's one thing...but I can't *stand* you, kid." The man proceeded to shower me with a barrage of insults. "What the hell is

wrong with you, huh? Why are you so obsessed with what other people think of you?”

And so on.

“God, and your grin is so damn creepy! Like, is that seriously supposed to be a *smile*? Try a little harder, kid! We can see the contempt in your eyes!”

And so forth.

“Do you think you’re the saddest little boy in all the world or something? Huh?!”

His voice only grew in volume as he continued, and before long, it was overwhelming every other conversation in the bar.

“What’s up? You guys gonna fight?”

“Ha ha! Get ‘em, kid!”

“Shut *up*, you idiots!” roared Soldat, cowing the crowd back into silence. “Now listen up, Quagmire. You’re nothin’ but a—”

“C’mon, Sol. Give it a rest already.” As Soldat leaned forward to continue his ranting, one of his friends who’d been watching from behind grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled him back.

“Screw you! This kid thinks no one in the whole world has it worse than him! I don’t know what the hell happened to you, Quagmire, but you’re fuckin’ depressing! You don’t have the guts to face your own problems! Where do you get off acting like some hotshot lone wolf? You think the rules don’t apply to you or something? Well, I’ve had it with your shit! You make me sick!”

His words felt like actual daggers stabbing into my chest. At some point, my legs had begun to shake; I was clenching my hands tightly in my lap. My body was trembling. My throat was quivering. But when I spoke, my voice came out oddly calm. “Sorry about that. I didn’t know I was bothering you with my presence. I’ll do my best to not to be in the same room as you again.”

For some reason, this prompted Soldat to pound our table so hard it actually broke in half. Shattered wood and half-eaten food flew all over the place, and my bowl of red bean soup splattered onto my lap.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you *trying* to piss me off, kid? You’re always like this! All you ever do is advertise yourself, and then you act like you’re too good for the money! You having fun acting like a martyr, huh? We all need cash to *survive*, damn it!”

I didn’t respond. Silence felt like my only option. There was no point trying to have a conversation with someone like this.

“Shit. I’m sorry, he’s had a few too many... Let’s go, Sol!”

“Shaddup! Lemme go! Come on, Quagmire! Throw a damn punch, why don’t you? You’re pissed off, right? Take a swing at me, then! Stop sitting in your patch of mud oinking about how sad you are! Act like a man for once!”

I looked down and waited for the storm to blow past. There was no point getting into a fight here. Letting Soldat provoke me would accomplish nothing. The only way to deal with a drunkard is to ignore them completely. I just had to let this pass. It was that simple, really.

“Sol, back off! You’re taking this way too far!”

“Let me go, dammit! Hey, Quagmire! You havin’ fun over there, huh? If you hate your life that much, then go die in a ditch somewhere! At least that way I won’t have to see your face again!”

Soldat’s friends dragged him out the door eventually, but I didn’t look up. I just stared at the soup on my lap, gripped my holy idol in my pocket, and kept my mind totally blank. I stayed that way until he was gone and Sara had wiped the soup off me.

“That guy’s just the worst,” she muttered.

All I could do was slowly nod.

Sara

I was burning with anger as I headed back to my room. The moment I was inside, I tossed my bow and arrows onto the table, tore off my clothes, and threw myself onto the bed.

“That guy is the *worst!*”

I could feel my face flushing red at the thought of Soldat. *Sometimes a man's gotta fight? What a load of crap!* He had no idea how hard Timothy fought for all of us every single day! That smile *was* his weapon. Suzanne told me that a long time ago. That man couldn't begin to understand. What right did he have to insult anyone?

Maybe there were times when you had to stand up and fight. Fine. But wasn't it the party leader's job to prevent *pointless* fights and keep his people safe? Soldat sure as hell wasn't doing a very good job of that. What had he planned to do if we'd gotten into a fight back there in the ruins, anyway? Was he thinking he could kill us all easily and get away with it? The man was seriously arrogant, if so. That place was a maze-like fortress, and he hadn't blocked off any of the exits.

From everything I'd seen, that jerk was the one who needed to work on his leadership skills, not Timothy.

And just to top things off...why the hell had he picked on Rudeus, of all people? Rudeus fought bravely when he needed to. He stood alone against all those enemies to buy time for us to get away. Soldat didn't know any of that. He hadn't seen Rudeus in action. What gave him the right to insult the kid like that?

Sure, Rudeus could get on your nerves sometimes. Unlike Timothy, he never stood up for himself at all, and that fake smile he always plastered on his face made me grimace every time I saw him. But even so...

At this point, it occurred to me that I was actually taking Rudeus' side for some reason. Why was I doing that? Didn't I hate that kid?

Maybe I didn't.

No, that didn't make any sense. Maybe it was just that I hated Soldat even more. Yeah. That was definitely it. Rudeus wasn't as bad as Soldat, so I had to take his side on this one. Simple enough.

If nothing else, Rudeus never put us down like that. He always treated Timothy and the others with genuine respect. And he was an incredibly talented magician, but he never acted like he was too good for us. He always tagged along on our jobs, and bought time for us to run when things got dangerous...

"...Okay, hold on. That's not right."

Rudeus was a noble by birth. He didn't really act like one, but that didn't matter. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, and that was bad enough in itself. I hated rich kids who wanted to pretend they were adventurers. But I also hated the nobility in general. My hometown was destroyed by their arrogance. They didn't lift a finger to help when the monsters came rushing out of that forest back home. They never sent the knights to save us.

It was their fault my mom and dad were dead. The men who had a *duty* to protect our village just...let us die.

I hadn't forgotten the despair I'd felt back then. I never would.

Yeah. That's right.

I had a good reason to hate the nobility. And Rudeus was a noble, so that meant I hated him too.

"...But Rudeus fought for us, didn't he?"

He fought against the Luster Grizzlies. He fought against the Snow Drakes, too. He never ran away to save himself, even when he could have. He didn't have a duty to protect us. He wasn't even a member of Counter Arrow. Still, he tried to save us. He tried to buy us time.

And when I saw him fighting for us...I went running back to save him. Because I didn't want to see him die.

It's not like I *ever* wanted him to die or anything. Of course not. But...I still surprised myself a little when I went back to save him.

If I hated him, wouldn't I have left him behind in a situation like that?

"...Ugh. This sucks."

Lately, when I looked at Rudeus, it felt like the ground was shifting underneath my feet. I loathed the nobility, but I couldn't bring myself to hate *him* too strongly. I didn't know how to deal with that. I wasn't even sure what I really hated anymore. Nothing made any sense.

But at the end of the day...

Yeah, all right. Fine. I guess I have to admit it. I don't hate Rudeus.

He was the child of some rich jerk, but there was more to him than that. I didn't hate him. That was it, though. That was as far as I would go. I definitely didn't *like* him or anything.

Not hating someone is a very different thing from liking them. Obviously.

"I don't like Rudeus one bit."

With that fact safely established, I let myself drift off to sleep.

Chapter 4: The Forest at Night

Several months passed and it was now winter. Winter in the Northern Territories was harsh. It was almost hard to believe that this place was only a bit further north of the Asura Kingdom, considering the abundance of snow that almost seemed to bury the land.

As the snow closed off the region, imports from the neighboring kingdoms ceased, and residents were no longer able to get fresh vegetables. Their meals instead consisted of the heaps of beans they gathered before winter, fermented dishes such as pickled vegetables, and the meat of beasts that adventurers hunted down. It was the custom in this region to wash down such crude, bland meals with strong alcohol. Those around me had long pitied me for not drinking, but it mattered little to me. Lately, nothing I ate had any flavor, anyway.

Although it was winter now, my life remained the same. I did physical training, prayed, ate my food, then headed off to do my work as an adventurer. Such was my daily routine. However, it was nearing six months since I'd come to this town and I felt like there was little left for me to accomplish here. For better or worse, the name "Quagmire Rudeus" was beginning to spread. I was proactive in offering my assistance to the younger generation of adventurers, and I was well-known among the veterans as well. I even had collaborators within some of Rosenberg's adventuring parties, who would ask about Zenith on my behalf when they ventured to far-off villages. One such party, which set off before winter began, assured me they would spread word.

Perhaps as a result of this hard work, my reputation had also spread among the merchants that conducted business with adventurers, such as those owning weapon shops, armor shops and

item shops. On top of that, I'd also managed to make a good impression on a store specializing in magical implements. If they ran into any trouble, I would help them out, and they would spread word of my existence as payment. I wasn't sure how effective this would be, but the merchants had their own networks. I hoped that, through one of these connections, word might reach Zenith.

Then again, considering the radio silence despite my efforts here, she was likely not in the area. Another possibility was that she was already—

No, stop. Thinking about that isn't going to do any good, I chided myself.

"Phew..." I sighed as I slipped on my cold weather gear and left the inn. My destination was the Adventurers' Guild.

It was chilly outside. The snow was barely coming down, and the breeze wasn't very strong. The Snow Hedgehog fur wrapped around me felt warm, but the wind on my face was frigid. My breath emerged as a white mist, and the spit in my mouth felt like it might freeze. While the temperature was better now than at night or early dawn, it was still unmistakably chilly.

I shivered as I plodded across the snow-covered street. *I should probably move on to the next city when spring comes*, I thought to myself, even though I felt entirely unmotivated to do so.

The Adventurers' Guild bustled with people in the winter. This was largely because few parties chose to undertake multiple-day trips while our surroundings were snowed in. Instead, they would pursue work within the city or prioritize requests that could be completed before nightfall. Otherwise, they might head for a village just a day or two away and plan to stay there.

Inevitably, this meant many parties lounged about in the guild, waiting for the right request to be posted. Of course, my work didn't

change at all. I would approach those hesitating over a quest, or someone would invite me along to accompany them. I was an extremely useful party member, given that I could cast all four schools of offensive magic without incantation.

It wasn't an ideal situation, of course. I didn't want to simply be used for my abilities; I wanted the parties to get to know me and use that to spread my name. But I was also at a loss for what to do next.

Today, like always, I took a seat near the bulletin board. At some point I'd begun to treat this as my personal seat. I wondered if someone else occupied it while I was off on missions.

"Tch."

As I was looking at the rows of requests on the board, waiting for other adventurers, I heard someone click their tongue. My heart felt leaden as I glanced backward and caught sight of Stepped Leader approaching the bulletin board. The one who'd made their disgust audible was, to no one's surprise, Soldat.

Ever since that incident in the bar, he'd seemed to harbor a deep contempt for me, and whenever he spotted me he would tut or find some other way to make that contempt known. I preferred to avoid him if possible, but now that it was winter, he and the others couldn't go off labyrinth diving.

"Looking for leftovers again?" Soldat asked mockingly.

"I have my reasons for doing this."

"What reasons? Everything you do is half-assed," he scoffed, before heading over to the bulletin board.

I knew I was being half-assed. I wasn't sure how to fix that problem, but no one was perfect. Right now, I was trying my best to do what I needed to do. What part of that was so unpleasant to him?

Wish he'd just keep out of it. It's got nothing to do with him, I thought sullenly.

Soldat promptly selected his party's next mission, wrapped up his business at the reception desk, and left the guild. He never lingered long, either because he couldn't stand being in my presence or because he just wanted to keep himself busy with work. He would enter, make a beeline for the bulletin board, quickly select a request, and be on his way. Then he would return that evening or the following day, and if we ran into each other, he would mock me again.

It wasn't harassment. Soldat was also doing his utmost to avoid me, I was sure. Still, every single time he saw me he would tell me I was garbage or worthless or doing things half-assed, so I was understandably exhausted. Maybe his true objective was to discourage me from being at the guild at all.

Occasionally, the members of Counter Arrow would step in to help if they were present, but they weren't here today. Come to think of it, I hadn't seen them for two whole days now. Since I hadn't seen them around town either, that must mean they'd gone off to some village for a prolonged period to take requests.

Things felt a bit lonely without them.

There were no notable requests that day. The snow had picked up immediately after I entered the guild, and during blizzards, parties who weren't interested in low-paying work generally took the day off. Of course, there were also quite a few adventurers who were hurting for money, and set out to do unranked requests by themselves. Unranked quests included things like shoveling snow or clearing off people's roofs. Shoveling snow seemed like a fool's errand to me, but it had to be better than nothing.

If there were no job requests, I had nothing to do. But it didn't feel right to just stew in the gloomy atmosphere of the Adventurers' Guild, either. I decided to try taking one of those unranked requests.

“Trying something new” didn’t exactly absolve me of Soldat’s so-called “half-assing,” but his words certainly did instill within me a need to do *something*.

“Clearing snow off the road, clearing snow off rooftops, clearing snow out of the garden of the liege lord’s mansion, and clearing snow off the ramparts.”

Looking at the bulletin board, all of the missions had to do with snow. The only difference between the requests was who made it. Just thinking about heading out into the cold to move snow and dump it elsewhere was depressing, but perhaps I should just be glad that it was a way to earn money, right?

Nah, the coin hardly seemed like it was worth the effort. Still, despite my reservations, I still decided to take one of the jobs.

“How unusual, Mister Quagmire, for you to take a request like this.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a change of pace.”

“A change of pace, hm? Yes, I think that sounds wonderful!” The female receptionist smiled merrily and processed the request.

The mission was located at what basically amounted to a snow collection center. Though it wasn’t particularly large, snow from around the town was carried here to this relatively small plaza. In the middle of this park-sized plaza was an enormous furnace, and that was it.

I approached the man who seemed like he was in charge and showed him the request I’d received. “My name is Rudeus Greyrat. A pleasure.”

“You that famous Quagmire guy?” he asked.

“I don’t really know if I’m famous or not,” I said awkwardly.

“Well, then hurry up and get to it.”

Those weren’t the most helpful instructions. “Umm...may I ask what kind of work I’m supposed to be doing?”

“Ahh, so it’s your first time, eh? The work is simple. People haul snow in here, you use that scoop over there to pack it in toward the back. Basically, you’re packing the snow. We’ve got a route set up for accessing the magical implement, so don’t pile the snow on that. Once you got enough piled up, wait for the signal and activate that magical device over there. Even if your mana runs out, the snow’ll keep coming, so don’t just leave. You can keep helping us organize it.”

“All right, got it.” I still wasn’t quite sure what kind of job this was, but I knew what I was supposed to do, so there was no use point in thinking too hard. I just had to do it.

I was given a shovel by another staff member. Just as instructed, I began to transfer the haphazard piles of snow to the back of the plaza. Things would work better if people just dumped it there to begin with, I thought. Then again, there was the magical device in the center. Considering the problems that would arise if someone accidentally broke it or buried it in snow, maybe this was the best route after all.

Such were my absentminded thoughts as I worked. I exchanged a few words with the other adventurers working alongside me, and we shoveled the snow together, throwing it atop a drift that was about as tall as I was. There were other men packing atop the drift, as well. The wall we ultimately created was about three times my size.

The snow was heavy, but I had my well-trained right arm “Hulk” and left arm “Hercules.” They were crying out in joy at the sudden influx of delicious lactic acid. I focused my strength in my lower back,

braced my legs and moved my arms, leaving the lifting to my muscles as I hauled the snow.

This is an impressive load; here we go, Hulk's voice boomed as my elbow muscle bulged. *If we must,* Hercules seemed to reply in turn as my bicep drew back. The triceps on either arm felt like they were being ripped apart.

"You've got some strength for a magician," one of the other workers commented.

"Even a magician has need for strength," I said. "I've been working out."

"Come on, a magician doesn't need strength."

My body warmed, and sweat began to pour from my upper body. It actually felt pretty good moving muscles I didn't ordinarily use. Maybe I'd made the right decision taking this mission.

"Okay, Quagmire, go ahead and make your way to the magical device. I'll give you the signal."

"Roger." Per my orders, I returned the shovel and headed over to the device. Unfortunately, since it was located in the middle of our wall, you had to go around the entrance of the plaza to access it. I took one of the paths running through the plaza and began to make my way there. I could take a shortcut by using my magic to burn a path through, but when in Rome... I decided to just take the long way.

"There's a lot of kids here too."

Snow was still being brought over by the entrance to the plaza. There were adventurers, townspeople, and a bunch of militia members. Mixed in their number were some small children as well.

Well, it is just carrying snow, I assured myself. *Even kids can handle that.*

Their transportation methods varied. There were those who carried snow in buckets, those who carried it on their backs in barrels, those who carried it in carts, and those who hauled in snow-filled wooden boxes. They all had blank looks on their faces. I suppose it was natural that no one looked like they were having fun. Shoveling snow wasn't enjoyable for anyone.

Still, the children looked a bit more enthusiastic than the adults. I wondered if it was because they really liked it or if it was for a more realistic reason, such as knowing that the more they carried, the more they'd get paid. Young boys and girls hauled their densely packed wooden buckets, their faces flushed bright red, making repeated round trips.

Perhaps the heavy snowfall left the residents with nothing else to do, and that was why there were so many people here.

As I watched, one girl who'd been toddling along carrying snow suddenly fell. The ground should have been soft enough to cushion her, but she clutched at her foot in pain, tears welling up.

I somehow found myself going over to her and crouching as I said, "What's wrong?"

"Oh...! I-It's nothing." She clamped a hand over her foot as if she were frightened. She immediately tried to stand, but her face crumpled and she staggered.

"Please, let me have a look." I moved her hand and slipped her boot off. When I did, I discovered her foot was red and swollen, with blackened toes and blisters. This had to be frostbite. Just looking at it was heartrending. "Let this divine power be as satisfying nourishment, giving one who has lost their strength the strength to rise again. Healing!"

"Ah!"

Once I pressed my hand to it and recited the incantation, her foot quickly returned to normal. The healing magic in this world sure

was handy. But after I'd finished tending to the opposite foot as well, the girl turned to me with a look of despair. After I'd gone to all that trouble to heal her, too. Why was she making that face?

"Did I do something unnecessary?" I asked.

"U-um, I-I don't have any money. I can't...pay you anything."

"Oh." I felt like I'd heard about lowlifes who approached the injured or sick without invitation, healed their wounds and then demanded payment that couldn't be made. When this happened, particularly at orphanages, the orphans were then taken to be sold as slaves.

"I don't really need anything," I said and stood. If I did something that reprehensible to a child, I'd never be able to face Ruijerd.

"Hey, Quagmire, what're you doin'?!"

When I got to my feet, the manager was looking my way, yelling. The plaza was buried in snow three times my height. It had been half-covered when I first arrived, but it had filled up quickly since.

"I'm going." I hurried over to the magical device.

"Okay, Quagmire. Do it."

"Okay!" Just as I was ordered, I put my hand on the device and began to pump mana in. I wasn't used to magical devices like this, so I had no idea how much it needed, but I was sure that the manager would let me know when it was enough. I just had to keep going until then.

As I continued charging the device and confirmed it was working, I looked around. "Whoa."

The device was heating the area closest to it. The snow gradually melted and was absorbed into the ground. Apparently, the ground of the plaza was also a magical device, for I could see a

geometric shape carved into what looked like brick beneath us. Or perhaps the whole plaza itself was part of the device?

I continued to watch the snow melt as I poured in more of my mana. I couldn't take my eyes off it. It was like watching snow thaw in fast forward, like I was witnessing spring's approach, as white gave way to a spread of orange brick below. But spring was still distant, of course. The sky was still a murky gray, and the snow continued to fall.

The snow in the plaza steadily disappeared, and I could see the faces of all those gathered in the area. "Oooh!"

A commotion broke out, along with applause. *What's this about?* I wondered. I dropped my hands and joined them in the applause.

"Yeaah, I should've known. So this is what an A-rank magician's mana can do." The manager approached, looking somewhat impressed.

"Um...is this enough?" I asked.

"Yeah, more than enough."

"I'm still not out of mana though, so...?" The falling snow was rapidly painting over the orange brick once more. At this rate, it would soon pile up again.

"Nah, it's fine. Your mission is complete. Good work. It would really help us out if you'd come back when you're free," said the manager, signing my request form as complete.

That was quick. "Uh, are you sure I don't have to pack snow anymore?"

"After how much you melted, yeah. Honestly, I didn't even think you'd get through one-third of it. Besides, I can't give you any more money than this."

So that was it. By melting all the snow, I'd completed the request. That made sense. This manager was a pretty cool guy, too, considering he could've said nothing and just made me keep working.

Now I was back to being bored. Not like I really *wanted* to shovel snow, but more like I didn't feel I'd given it my best. Maybe I should ask for the shovel again. I didn't even care if it was just free labor.

No. If that was the case, maybe it would be better to return to the guild and pick a different unranked mission. It didn't even have to be shoveling snow. I could, for instance, just do physical training or—

“Mister Magician!”

Just as I was about to leave, a small child flagged me down, interrupting my internal debate. It was a young girl, but not the same one I'd helped just moments ago. “What's your name?” she asked.

“Rudeus Greyrat,” I answered, even though I had no idea why she was asking. She took off running the minute she heard my name, not even bothering to reply.

What the heck? So she's just going to ask my name and run away? What a rude child.

Or so I thought...but the girl ran toward a gathering of other young children. As she huddled amongst them, they seemed to confer with one another. I could hear their hushed voices from where I stood. Was my name really worth all that whispering? After a while, the group nodded and disappeared into an alleyway. As I looked on, I spotted the girl I had healed amongst them. She glanced over at me and bowed before scurrying off.

“Hm.” It usually soured my mood when people gossiped about me, but not this time—probably because they weren't badmouthing me. Perhaps something good would come from making a name for myself among those kids. And even if it was completely pointless, I

didn't mind occasional acts of charity. I actually felt good about myself for a change.

Welp, let's get back to the guild, I decided.

There, in the early afternoon at the guild, I spotted some faces I knew: Suzanne, Timothy, and Patrice—all the members of Counter Arrow. Well, not *all*. If they were here at this hour, it meant they'd just finished a request, so I had probably just missed the others.

They were usually the ones to approach me, but I decided I should occasionally greet them first. After all, I was in a pretty good mood today. "Hello."

"Oh, it's Rudeus."

Hm? They seemed kind of gloomy. Not just Suzanne, but Timothy and Patrice as well. "Did something happen?" I asked.

"Yeah...it's Mimir and Sara."

I didn't see those two around, but just because the five of them were a group didn't mean they had to spend all their time together. That was how I rationalized their absence, anyway. Had something happened?

"Did the two of them get married or something?" I teased.

"So you crack those kind of jokes too, huh?"

"I'm sorry."

Timothy's usual smile was missing. In fact, his expression was just the opposite—all clouded over. It seemed my words had annoyed him. Was I right? Had something really happened? "Um, do you mind if I ask about it?"

Timothy went silent. Instead, it was Suzanne who looked up and said, “They’re dead.”

My rare joyful mood vanished in a second. “Oh. I see,” I said.

I couldn’t quite digest the idea that they were gone. And it wasn’t like this was the first time something like this had happened to me. As adventurers, death was our constant companion. I’d heard that another party I was close to had been completely wiped out.

Even so, it was depressing. Accepting their deaths wasn’t the same as being unaffected by them, after all. I wasn’t particularly close to either of them, nor did we know each other all that well. Still, we’d shared meals together; overcome death together. I couldn’t help feeling sad to hear they’d lost their lives.

But there was nothing to be done. Sooner or later, all adventurers would die. The possibility of death shadowed them so long as they continued this line of work. That was just how things were.

“No,” Timothy said. “Mimir aside, Sara isn’t dead *yet*.” Although I’d already accepted the fact, Timothy now claimed otherwise. His face twisted in frustration as he snapped at Suzanne and Patrice. “We were just separated from her during the battle. It’s not like we saw her corpse. So maybe if we had just searched a little more, we could have—”

“Give it up,” Suzanne urged. “You couldn’t see anything in that forest, not in that blizzard. We’re better off considering her dead.”

“But—”

“I said give it up! If we’d stayed there any longer to search, we would be dead too! We knew that, and that’s why we obeyed your orders!” Suzanne barked at Timothy as the latter hung his head.

It seemed Timothy had given the order to retreat. Now he was regretting his decision.

I could understand why. Regret was inevitable once you saw where your decision led. When you were forced to abandon something important, you couldn't help but wonder if you should have bet on that sliver of hope, even if it did result in a worse fate.

"Timothy, you don't have to take all the blame. We could have ignored orders back then, you know, but we agreed to come back here. We're equally responsible," said Patrice.

"That's right," agreed Suzanne. "We're with you. So don't get down on yourself."

The two of them were trying to comfort Timothy, even though they were surely heartbroken themselves. Perhaps they held on to a thin sliver of hope for Sara, but kept it to themselves because of how dangerous the search would be. They had to consider the future they still had ahead of them. If they ventured back out on impulse and were unlucky, they could lose another person. Maybe two. Maybe even the whole team.

As I considered that, I recalled what happened in that cave we'd explored a couple months ago, before winter began. Sara was the first one to come to my aid. In retrospect, that had been a really dangerous move. It could have led to the entire party being wiped out, or someone's death at the very least.

"So where was it that you got separated?" I asked.

"To the west, in Trier Forest. Visibility was so poor because of the blizzard that we somehow wandered into its bounds. The moment we tried to get out, a herd of Snow Buffaloes attacked us."

"So that's what happened. That must have been rough." Trier Forest. If I remembered correctly, that was half a day's journey away. "Well, I should be going," I said, turning to take my leave.

Timothy and the others said no more, and they didn't try to stop me, either.

I immediately left the guild and headed straight for the inn. Once inside, I darted up the stairs and rushed to my room. I kept my arctic clothing on and merely shook off the beads of water that had collected on it. I grabbed my large backpack from the corner of my room, tossed in my remaining stores of food, and shrugged the straps over my shoulders. Then I was gone, down the stairs and out the door.

Why was I doing this? I couldn't say. I knew, somehow, that this was sure to be a fool's errand. Regardless, I wanted to go. I wanted to see for myself if that young girl—who was always vulgar with her words and actions, always mimicking Suzanne—had really died or not.

I didn't know why.

Yeah, seriously, I didn't. Even so, I was traipsing out into the middle of this blinding blizzard.

"This storm is a real eyesore." I squinted at the sky. It was a smear of gray hiding behind a blanket of falling snow. I pointed my staff in its direction. Roxy had told me it was best not to meddle with weather, so I heeded her words as best I could.

I moved the clouds by creating a tornado to disperse them.

"There we go." The clear blue sky shone above me as I set forth, boots crunching through the snow.

Night had descended and it was pitch black by the time I arrived at Trier Forest. Thanks to my weather manipulation, I didn't have to wade through a blizzard to get here. Inside the forest, the trees formed a dome that covered the sky. My torch barely provided enough light to see with, and the snow lay dense and high on the

ground. As I moved forward, I found myself buried to the waist. It was significantly more difficult to walk than usual. I plodded forward, step by step. Occasionally, a heap of the frozen powder would come cascading off nearby trees, as if trying to bury me.

Hang on... It wasn't falling on its own. Something was dumping it on me.

I looked up and discovered the monster behind it: a Snowfall Treant. In the summer these were ordinary treants, but when winter came, snow accumulated on their branches. As their name implied, they would try to impede passing adventurers by burying them. They were a low-ranked treant unique to this region. They mostly just dumped snow on you, but there were occasionally individuals that could use ice magic, hurling down blocks of ice large enough to flatten a human in one blow. These were a higher-ranked sort called the Icefall Treant. I had yet to encounter one.

If possible, I would prefer to keep it that way.

"Burn in Place." I used fire magic to thaw the snow falling from above. "Stone Cannon." Then I used my earth magic to destroy the treant. It stopped moving after my attack blasted a hole through its trunk, sending splinters flying everywhere.

At this point, their attacks were merely a hindrance. In fact, the densely packed snow at my feet was a far bigger obstacle. Walking was difficult, and at times I found my feet completely swallowed by snow. When that happened, I used fire magic to melt my way through.

But my arctic gear was made of a Snow Hedgehog's pelt. As it absorbed the water, it became heavier, so I had to use wind magic to dry it. All of this slowed my pace.

Maybe in the future I should train myself to better navigate terrain like this.

I silently pushed forward as I considered that option. Part of me wondered what I was even doing. There was no way I could find Sara. The other three had searched for her immediately after she went missing and still didn't find her. Just how was I supposed to succeed where they failed? I didn't even have the sense to ask their exact location before I left.

I could call out and let her know where I was, but I wasn't doing that. I told myself that monsters would be alerted to my presence if I did, but that just made me think of what Soldat had said. *Half-assed*. Seriously, what was I even doing? This search did nothing but appease my own ego.

If that wasn't good enough, then what *would* satisfy me?

Finding Sara, of course. If I managed to find Sara using my own methods, that would satisfy me. It didn't matter whether she was dead or alive. The only thing that mattered was that I took action and had something to show for it.

That was it.

Results.

Right now, I just wanted results. Nothing else mattered. It wasn't as though I wanted desperately to save Sara, or that I wanted to repay the kindness the members of Counter Arrow had shown me. I just wanted to accomplish something. Or maybe it was that I wanted to actively make the choice to *not* abandon someone else.

Eris had abandoned me and it had left me severely depressed. I didn't want to do the same to someone else. I didn't want to do the horrible thing that had been done to me.

Maybe that was all it was. I didn't know—I couldn't know—why it was I was here, toughing it out like this.

"There they are."

Just as I was lost in a maze of my own thoughts, I spotted a herd of monsters ahead: a group of Snow Buffaloes. They huddled together amidst the sea of white. Their gray coats made for superb camouflage in a blizzard, allowing them to launch surprise attacks on unsuspecting adventurers, but right now the sky was clear. Although they were still difficult to see while hidden among the shadows of the trees, there was no mistaking their presence.

Snow Buffaloes flocked together in wooded areas, forming a singular herd in each forest. They generally spent the winter in one area, birthing and rearing their young in the snow. If someone was attacked by a herd, it was usually because that person had trespassed on their territory.

In other words, there was a high likelihood that this was the area where Timothy and Sara got separated. It was also likely that her corpse was in the belly of one of those creatures. Buffaloes from my previous life were herbivores, but these beasts were carnivores.

I channeled my mana into both hands. It might be impossible to defeat them all at once, but a preemptive strike would thin their numbers.

“Earth Hedgehog!”

The magic I discharged from my hands struck the ground below the Snow Buffaloes. In an instant, a vast number of spikes burst upwards, thick as human arms, skewering and killing ten or so.

“Brwooor!” The herd was flustered by my sudden assault, and spooked by their surroundings as they began to move.

“Earth Lance!” With that spell, I killed those that remained, one after the other. It was mostly trivial work. They darted around in confusion searching for me, but by the time they discovered my location, most were already dead. The ones who spotted me soon joined their ranks.

When only a few individuals were left, the herd attempted to escape. But it was too late. I had no intention of letting a single one get away.

“Earth Lance!”

I moved like a machine, continuously launching magic at them. Pretty soon, none were left alive.

If they had fled a little sooner, or if the remaining beasts had grouped up, they might have had better luck. The fact that they didn’t instantly flee when attacked was proof they were monsters, rather than wild animals. They fought, and fought, and only tried to run when they knew they wouldn’t win. Creatures that thirsted for battle were fearsome, indeed.

“Phew.” I’d intended to be cautious, just to be sure that I didn’t catch Sara in the crossfire if she were in their vicinity, but the discretion seemed pointless. I waded over to the scattered lot of buffalo corpses. The cloying stench of blood surrounded me as I reached the center of the fallen herd.

A mountain of bones lay there, remains of the prey they had devoured. Most were of four-legged animals, but there were also other Snow Buffalo bones among the pile. *So these guys are cannibals*, I noted mentally.

I searched through the heap. The creatures had a habit of leaving leftovers other than bones, using the smell to lure in other beasts and animals to be a steady supply of food. Ruijerd had done something similar. It was frightening to think the buffaloes had enough wisdom to do the same thing as the Demon Continent’s fearsome Dead End.

I expected I would find the bones of those they’d eaten for lunch here. In fact, I spotted several humanoid skulls. I made another mental note of that as I shoved aside the other bones, trying to find

what I was looking for: Sara's corpse, or at least something she'd worn on her person. If I found that, I was sure I'd be satisfied.

"Ngh!" A groan slipped from me as I fished through the bones. I had found a human head that still had skin on it and seen the face of someone I knew. "Mimir..."

It was Counter Arrow's healer. Half of his head had already been eaten. His cheeks were gone, leaving behind just his forehead and part of his hair, which were somehow just enough to identify him.

"Gh...hah...argh." My breath was caught in my throat. Mimir was dead. Timothy had already said so.

That's right. I forgot because they immediately moved on to talking about Sara. It's not surprising that I found him here.

We'd scarcely spoken. The only thing I remembered of him was the awkward look on his face when we were drinking at the bar after returning from the Galgau Ruin, during the whole debate about whether I should have been left behind or not.

I produced a folded bag from my backpack and tucked his head into it. I wanted to bring back that much of him, at least.

I blinked away the stinging sensation in my eyes, gritted my teeth, and continued the search. If Mimir was in such a state, then perhaps Sara was also...

"Hm?"

There was a ring, fallen deep in the pile. Not just one ring, either, but an assortment of ornaments people had worn. I'd never heard anything about Snow Buffaloes hoarding shiny objects; these had probably accumulated as the beasts feasted.

"Ah..."

It was among these other objects that I found it, a familiar decoration in the shape of a feather.

It was Sara's earring.

“Haa...” A sigh slipped out. I felt the tension leave my body. She really was dead. After getting separated from Timothy and the others, she must have been pursued by the Snow Buffaloes until she ran out of stamina. And then they ate her. Caught in a blizzard, filled with despair, trying desperately to stay alive, lacking the power to do so...

Dreary thoughts churned in my head.

True, Sara and I weren't that close. She would mock or deride me whenever we met. Yet, unlike Soldat, she hadn't been that harsh of late. I really didn't hold any ill feelings for her. Her words had never truly hurt me, maybe because she never really meant what she said. I was sure, given the chance, we could've gotten along.

Chewing on my lip, I fought back tears and stood. It wasn't the result I'd hoped for, but my task was complete. I got what I came for. Now I just had to clean up and go home.

“...Whoof.” I inhaled, filling my body with strength once more, then began gathering the bodies of the Snow Buffaloes. It'd be difficult to haul them around with mere physical strength, so I used earth magic to pile them by the mountain of bones.

You would expect other beasts to flock here, lured by the scent of blood, but maybe they knew a herd of buffalo was here. Or maybe I just got lucky. In any case, none came my way.

I set fire to the heap of corpses, and the smell of burning flesh filled the area. It was a foul odor. I randomly tossed in several wooden logs. They crackled and snapped, emitting gouts of smoke that drifted into the night sky.

This would be my incense for the dead. Their funeral pyre.

For a while I watched the smoke. There should've been thoughts racing through my head, yet for some reason, my heart felt empty. I just stood there, vacantly gazing at the flames and the fumes they produced.

“Guess I should go home,” I muttered a little later, after ensuring the fire was contained.

If I left now, it would be dawn by the time I made it back to the city. Once the guild opened, I would show Mimir’s remains and Sara’s earring to the members of Counter Arrow. Then I would sleep. Sleep was best at a time like this.

With those thoughts in mind, I turned on my heel and—

“...Hm?”

I heard something: the faint creak of water instantly freezing over.

A monster, I assumed. Was there a monster in these parts that did that? Regardless, the noise sounded distant, even if muffled by the crackling of the fire. I suspected it was something seduced by the scent of the Snow Buffaloes’ blood. Probably best to leave this area immediately. My mission was already complete. There was no need to linger.

I had a bad feeling about this.

Dread seized me, as if there was something out there I couldn’t see. Something watching me, like a tiger prowling in the shadows.

I surveyed the area, but there were no beasts in sight. The sound was gone as well. All I heard was the creaking of branches and the rustling of trees in the wind—all sounds of nature.

Just to be sure, I glanced up.

“Whoa!”

I instantly leaped to the side. A split second later, an enormous block came smashing down beside me, its mass sending the surrounding snow upwards in a surge. My vision was shrouded in a curtain of frozen powder, but my Eye of Foresight saw clearly what the object was: ice. A frozen block of it had just struck the ground

where I had been. What would have happened if I had been beneath it? I shuddered and glanced behind me.

There it was, a shadow as big as a mountain. It had a thick trunk, doubtless hundreds of years old, with an overgrowth of foliage blotting out the sky above. Its roots, wide as my torso, creaked as they pursued me.

“An Icefall Treant?”

Having traversed the Demon Continent and Great Forest, I was used to the sight of treants. However, this was the first time I had seen one so enormous. Just how old was it? Treants grew in strength as they aged. This one was abnormally ancient, so I wondered how strong it must be.

I gulped and retreated just as its gigantic branches came swinging. The treant’s gargantuan size made it impossible to avoid. I was sent flying like a bug swatted by a broom and tumbled through the snow, my entire body coated in white powder.

The treant stopped for a moment. When I looked, I saw something forming atop its branches. A flower? Fruit? No—magic! It was conjuring another block of ice.

This wasn’t the first time I’d seen a monster use magic, but it *was* the first time I’d seen an enormous tree produce a gigantic slab of frozen water.

“Gah!” I immediately poured mana into my staff and conjured a shockwave that slammed into my body. Like a shard of splintered wood, I went flying again, successfully escaping the block of ice that came slamming down just a hair’s breadth away, right where my body had been. A nearby tree let forth a resounding crack as its trunk fractured.

As I toppled through the snow, I channeled mana into my staff once again. I was going to use Stone Cannon. I put everything I had

into the spell and launched it at the treant. The creature was huge; there was no way I could miss.

It was *too* huge, in fact.

My Stone Cannon plunged through the air and made impact. A familiar blast echoed around me, but the Icefall Treant was still moving. The cannon I had poured my all into should have made a direct hit. Had the creature really sustained no damage?

Dumbfounded, I looked at the treant, which was illuminated by my dwindling bonfire. Its trunk was frozen over, wrapped in a shell of ice armor. Smart for a damn tree. The shield had effectively weakened the impact of my Stone Cannon, which now lay embedded in the tree's base.

So Stone Cannon had little effect, huh? What should I use instead, then? Fire? Or maybe wind? Water? What could I use to damage the creature? No, wait...If I couldn't assess my opponent's strength, then it was wisest to retreat.

It was at that moment, right as I was about to flee, that I caught sight of it. Entwined in the creature's roots was a human figure. I froze the moment I saw it. I recognized who it was.

"Sara...?!"

For some reason, Sara's body was visible at the base of the tree. Was she dead or still breathing? Treants usually killed their prey before draining them for nutrients, but some would just bind their target instead, gradually sapping their life. She seemed to be in a bad state, her body swollen and covered in bruises, but not wounded enough for me to be sure she was dead.

Was she still alive or not? "Hm..."

Something felt off. I narrowed my eyes and had a closer look. A number of corpses were tangled in the vast roots of the tree at about the same latitude as Sara. Some were decaying carcasses, including a completely desiccated Luster Grizzly. One thing in particular stood

out—a Snow Buffalo. It thrashed about, caught in the tree’s roots. Although trapped, it was desperate to get away, struggling to break free as foam bubbled from its mouth.

Of course, there was no way it could escape from the sturdy roots. But its presence proved that this particular Icefall Treant took its prey alive. Perhaps Sara wasn’t dead, then; just unconscious.

How was I going to save her? The Icefall Treant was a tree the size of a skyscraper, with half its trunk protected by a barrier of ice. Frankly, I didn’t feel like I *could* defeat it. Even if I could use magic with a wide area of effect, Sara would surely get caught in the blast. She wasn’t trapped by ice, but could I really cut her free, get her out, and escape?

While I was preoccupied, the treant continued its pursuit, its branches swinging at me. “Cutting Flame!” My magic severed a block of wood from the branch as I retreated backward.

Next, it would send another oversized ice cube at me, and I would have to evade that as well. Just as predicted, a clump of frozen water came plummeting toward me. It was easy to dodge, of course, since I already knew it was coming.

Up next, another attack from its branches. Right, then left.

“Hm?”

As I evaded the attack, I got a sense that something was amiss. I stared suspiciously at the treant. In the dark, I heard the familiar crackle of water freezing as the tree completed its next ice block.

Could it be... Did this creature only have one set attack pattern—launch an ice block, then use its branches to mow down its opponent? Was this just a repeat of that routine, over and over?

My suspicions were confirmed after dodging the next several branch and ice block attacks. Maybe it was hiding something up its sleeve... No, this was a simple treant. Enormous though it might be, it

was really only a D-ranked monster. It was hard to believe it knew any other attack patterns.

“My Cutting Flame spell worked.” I kept that in mind and cautiously surveyed the tree, noting that the ice armor only covered the thickest parts of its trunk. If not for the darkness, I would’ve noticed that instantly, but its ability to defend against my Stone Cannon had thrown me off.

“Can I do this...?” My opponent’s massive size had me a bit intimidated. Still, I knew what kind of creature it was and that it only had two attack patterns. While it was large, it was only a treant.

“I’ve got this!” I muttered to myself before stepping forward.

I evaded the ice block and used Cutting Flame to slice through the branches that came swooping toward me. I could have used a more effective type of magic, but I wasn’t sure that the treant didn’t have something else up its sleeve.

The treant’s weaknesses became clear as I continued. Due to its massive size, only a few roots were long enough to reach the ground. Once I realized this and used my magic to slice through them, the battle was won. Although it never attempted to escape, the treant stopped attacking me and instead froze in place, feigning death. I used that opportunity to get close while keeping my guard up, aware that it might attempt to crush me. But I got to it and cut Sara free, dragging her back to safety.

“Sara...! Sara!”

“Mm...” Her eyelids fluttered when I called her name. “Huh? Who’s there?” she asked faintly.

“It’s Rudeus.”

“Rudeus...?”

“I came to save you,” I explained as I hoisted her onto my back, beating a hasty retreat. While I’d literally cut off the treant’s ability

to attack along with its branches, there was no guarantee it wouldn't come after me with its ice or some other attack.

It gave no sign of pursuit, however, not even as I waded through the snow. I kept running, quick as I could, until the treant was out of sight.

It had been a few hours since we escaped the tree.

Once we were clear, I used healing magic to tend to Sara's wounds, which were severe. She'd sustained blows all over, with frostbite crawling up her skin from her extremities. Her bones were broken in several places, and especially badly in her right thigh. The femur was snapped clean in two and the surrounding area fiercely swollen. Most likely a complex fracture or something of the like.

Healing required direct skin contact, so I had to remove her shirt and pants and to press my hand to the appropriate places. I figured she would say something to me again, but she was silent. Perhaps, as an adventurer, this was as normal to her as breathing. Mimir was also a healer, so he must have had to do this to perform his magic, too.

That said, she'd crawled through the snow, so her underwear was distractingly translucent. I endeavored not to peek, but try as I might, I couldn't avoid seeing it.

"I was hit by a Snow Buffalo's charge and fell from a cliff," she said suddenly.

"Huh?" I blurted, confused at first.

"That's why my leg is broken."

"Oh."

I was sure she'd noticed me looking at her underwear, but she ignored that in favor of explaining how she was separated from everyone else. Perhaps the reason she didn't try to cover up was to reward me for having saved her. A sight for sore eyes. It'd been months since I last saw a woman.

"I found your earring among the bones the herd had gathered. I thought you were dead," I confessed.

"Eh? Oh, that? That earring is a magic item. If you stab the end of the feather into your opponent, they'll be caught in an illusion for a short time," explained Sara, touching a hand to her ear. "I might have made it if not for landing in that Icefall Treant's territory."

Apparently, after escaping the Snow Buffalo, Sara had built herself a snow cave in an attempt to endure the frigid temperatures, using her arrows as an emergency splint on her leg. As she waited all alone for help, the Icefall Treant happened upon her and crushed her cave with a block of ice, taking her hostage.

If I had been in her position, I doubted I could have come up with the idea of building a snow cave. I would probably have frozen to death instead.

"Hey, are you about done?" she asked, covering herself with her hands while I was busy mulling that over.

"Oh, yes. Thank you."

"Why the hell are you thanking me...?" she mumbled to herself, her face red as she turned away and slipped her pants back on. Her leg had been broken, the skin pale and swollen, but now it looked healthy and supple. A leg worthy of gratitude. It was only natural that I should say thanks, no matter what the circumstances were.

For some reason I felt like something was off. Like there was something missing. What was it? I was sure it couldn't be anything *too* big, but even so... "There's nothing wrong with your leg, is there?"

“Yep, it’s fine. It doesn’t even hurt anymore, see?” She bent and stretched before me.

If my healing magic hadn’t failed, then what was it? “I just have a sense that something is amiss,” I told her. “Does anything about our situation feel off at all to you? Maybe it’s about where I found your earring...?”

“No, since I dropped it, I wouldn’t be surprised wherever you found it. Oh! But it *is* weird that you’re here by yourself.”

“Oh, no, it’s just... I heard Timothy and the others say that you were missing, so...”

“So they went home after all,” she said in realization.

“No, I didn’t mean—”

“It’s fine,” Sara interjected. “I don’t blame them. An obvious decision, given the circumstances... So, is everyone safe?”

“No. Mimir is dead. I have part of him right here,” I announced, lifting my bag. She took it from me and peeked inside. her face screwed up when she saw its contents. Then, her expression gave way to sadness. “I see... Does everyone already know?”

“They seemed very sure of his death. I thought if I brought his remains back then you could bury him somewhere close.”

“Yeah, that would probably make Mimir happy. Um, at least let me carry this bag.”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

Sara drew her lips tight and hoisted the bag onto her back. In the end, I still couldn’t identify the strange feeling I had. There was nothing to do except let it go. Even if I did figure it out, there was likely nothing I could do about it right now. “Okay, then let’s go back.”

“Yeah.” Sara nodded. The meek way she did it was cute. Almost like Eri—

I frantically shook my head to keep from remembering her.

“Hey,” Sara called out after a few steps. I glanced back to see a look of relief on her face, smiling as if she might cry at any moment. “Thank you for saving me.”

She was full of gratitude, and for some reason I was captivated by that smile. I wished I could see it forever.

Something within me clicked together right then. It was almost as if everything I had done up until then had been forgiven.

I had been saved.

It was strange that I found myself thinking that, since I was the one who had saved her.



It was near dawn by the time we returned to the city of Rosenberg. Halfway there, Sara suggested that we make camp, but I shot that down, anxious to get back. For some reason the thought of just the two of us camping frightened me a bit.

“Ah!”

Familiar faces were gathered in front of Rosenberg. Three of them, in fact: Timothy, Suzanne, and Patrice. “Rudeus and...Sara?!”

“Suzanne!” The moment she spotted them, Sara immediately took off running and flung herself into Suzanne’s bosom.

“What happened? We were just about to go searching for you.”

“Rudeus saved me!”

None of them could hide their surprise as Sara recounted what had happened. Once she was done, they all turned to me, wide-eyed with disbelief. “So, that means last night... After you heard what we said, you immediately took off? By yourself?”

“Well, I mean...” I started to say.

“And how were we supposed to feel if you died out there, doing something so ridiculous?”

My body curled in on itself as Suzanne scolded me.

Sara stepped in front of me. “Hold on! Suzanne, there’s no need to put it like that!”

Suzanne studied her, eyes wide with surprise again, before she scratched at her cheek. “Yeah, I guess you’re right. Not like I have the right to say anything... It just threw me off. I mean, I am grateful. So first, I guess I should say thanks for rescuing Sara,” she said awkwardly.

Maybe she was thinking that I could have just joined them on the search instead of doing it all by myself. Still, it was only because I manipulated the weather that I had such a smooth trip. I doubted the snow would have stopped otherwise.

“No, I should be the one thanking you, as the party leader.” Timothy gripped my hand. He was solemn as he gazed at me, his usual soft smile nowhere to be seen. “If Sara hadn’t come back home alive, I would have deeply regretted my decision. Thank you.” He added, “How should we repay that debt? Feel free to name anything.”

His hand felt hot. Or maybe my body was just that cold. “That’s not necessary. You’ve all helped me out so many times.” I meant that, too. I really did feel like the members of Counter Arrow had always been there for me. That was also why I reacted on instinct the moment I heard Sara was missing. “Let’s just consider us even,” I said, managing to force a smile on my face.

Timothy looked me over again, then grinned the way he always did. “All right... Yeah. Then we’ll be here for you if you need it.”

“Yes. Likewise.”

Timothy and I exchanged a stiff handshake. And then, as if he’d just thought of something, he said, “Oh yeah, Rudeus...”

“What is it?”

“...No, sorry. It’s nothing.” He had a slightly conflicted look on his face as he shook his head.

I had a pretty good idea of what he was about to offer me, but I had no intention of pressing the issue. If his question was what I suspected, I would probably hesitate before ultimately declining. “Well then, let’s go home,” I said.

“Yeah, we’ll see you off.”

The members of Counter Arrow accompanied me all the way to my inn, as if it were only natural. It was still early morning, well before people began to stir. In the dawning light that gleamed off the snow as the sun made its ascent, the five of us walked together, frozen powder crunching beneath our feet. I was completely exhausted, as was Sara. The other three surely had their questions, but they prioritized letting me return to my room.

“This is far enough. Thank you,” I said, looking back at them.

“Rudeus, I’ll see you around!” Sara shouted after me as I went inside.

She’d been up all night, come to think of it. Unlike me, who had spent a leisurely afternoon shoveling snow, she’d been trapped in a raging blizzard in the forest with a broken leg, beset with horrific pain. She had to be fairly worn out, too. Maybe I should have agreed to camping outside. But if we’d done that, we might have missed the others leaving Rosenburg. Things had worked out for the best.

“Yeah, see you. Make sure to get some rest today.”

“You too!”

“Will do.” I waved at her and disappeared inside.

The inn’s lobby was warm, with a pleasant smell permeating the air. The owner had risen early and was already preparing breakfast. I left the first floor, which acted as a mess hall, clambered up to the third floor, and started a fire going in my room. Since it would take a while to heat up, I briefly opened the window to air the room out a little. From there, I could see the receding figures of Counter Arrow. At almost the same exact moment, one of them turned to look back.

Sara’s eyes met mine. She moved her lips, as if to say something. Her words were silent, though. I knew that because the others didn’t turn. What did she say? Since I couldn’t read lips, it was impossible for me to tell. I just waved back at her and watched her

go. She looked happy as she turned forward and scurried after the others.

I was hit by a sudden wave of drowsiness by the time I shut the window. *Let's go to sleep*, I decided, opting to lounge in bed and sleep until dinner. I felt like today, for the first time in a while, I could sleep soundly.

With that in mind, I flopped over onto my mattress.

Chapter 5: Abrupt Approach

Spring came, then summer. Time passed quickly, and soon it had been a year since I first came to Rosenberg. I was sufficiently well-known here now. People would speak of “Quagmire Rudeus” even in the small nearby villages. And yet, I had not heard anything of Zenith.

Even so, I stayed in Rosenberg rather than move on to the next city.

“Good work again today.”

“Good work!”

“Nice job!”

Today I was raising my glass in cheer with the members of Counter Arrow once again.

“You saved our backsides again. That’s our Quagmire!”

“No, no. I was only able to do as much as I did because of how skilled you all are,” I insisted.

“There you go again, being all humble. Come on, you were amazing enough to go in a forest at night all by yourself.”

Since that incident, I’d increasingly spent my time working alongside Counter Arrow. It was no coincidence—they were rather deliberate in inviting me on quests now. Initially I thought it a quirk of good timing, but they were always there when I showed up at the Adventurers’ Guild and always invited me along. Even someone as thickheaded as me eventually realized it was intentional.

Inevitably, that meant I went on fewer and fewer quests with other parties. Previously, I’d only teamed up with Counter Arrow one in five times. That now became one in three, then one in two, and now four in five. At this point I was basically a member of their group.

“...So you see, my father was a hunter, and I’ve been practicing with the bow ever since I was little. That’s why I’m using one right now, but it’s a bit inconvenient as an adventurer,” said Sara.

“My father was a knight. Apparently, before I was born, he planned to teach his kid swordplay if he had a son and magic if he had a girl. But I had more talent for magic than swordplay, so he recruited a magician named Roxy from Roa City to act as a home tutor for me.”

One other thing had changed: Sara and I were a lot closer. Now when we camped during missions or went for drinks afterward, she would naturally sit down beside me and strike up a conversation. At first these conversations were largely small talk, but lately we’d begun to talk about our childhoods and where we came from.

“That was how Roxy became my master. She was really incredible, too.”

“Uh-huh.”

“She was a demon and yet she tried her best among humans. She was so straightforward, and she didn’t let it get her down even when bad stuff happened. Watching her, I just—”

“Uh-huh. I see.”

Her mood would sour depending on the topic of the conversation, but in general, I thought we were getting along well.

Sara was from a village at the western edge of the Milbotts Region, close to the middle of the Asura Kingdom. She was born to parents who were hunters and grew up helping them from an early age. One day, when she was about ten, monsters suddenly came pouring out of the nearby forest, and her parents were both killed.

Orphaned and alone, Sara was picked up by Suzanne. Suzanne and Timothy were in the same party at the time, but the other members were completely different. They were adventurers who

had been sent from a nearby town to deal with the plague of monsters.

The number of beasts was impressive, as were both the number of adventurers thrown at them and the injuries that resulted. The entire party, save for Suzanne and Timothy, was wiped out. Mimir and Patrice had been in a similar situation. Thus, Counter Arrow was formed from adventurers who survived after the horde of monsters in the Milbotts Region had been dealt with.

Back then, Counter Arrow was only a D-ranked party. After Sara became an adventurer, she helped them out while rapidly raising her own rank. Soon, she became an official member as well. She presumably already had talent for the bow, but her progression was still incredibly fast.

Counter Arrow continued to swap members in and out in their progress to B-rank. By the time they achieved that, there was hardly any work left around the center of the Asura Kingdom. After bouncing around the rural areas, the members resolved to move to a more challenging location. They wavered between whether to go north or south, but they were already operating within the Donati Region, which was close to the Northern Territories. The north was also Timothy's birthplace, and he knew the land. So, in the end, they decided to head this way.

Well, all that aside... Sara was the daughter of hunters, huh? The same as Sylphie. I wondered where Sylphie was right now and what she was doing.

"When I heard the name Greyrat, I immediately thought you were son of one of the Asuran noble families. To me, it looked like you were trying to run away because things didn't go your way back home."

So she'd initially been prickly toward me because she misunderstood my origins and the reason I was doing things.

Prejudice, in other words. “Well, the name Greyrat is famous in the Asura Kingdom,” I agreed.

“Still, you’re not one of *those* Greyrats, right?”

“Yeah, uh, apparently I am related to them.”

“Oh. So you are...” She pursed her lips.

“I mean, of course I’m not nobility myself. So don’t worry about it.”

After a brief moment, Sara said, “When those monsters came pouring out of the forest, the nobility came up with all these excuses for why they didn’t send the knights. That’s why so many died.”

“The liege lord really did that?”

“Yeah. That’s what I heard.”

“Oh...well, sometimes people use loss as an excuse to criticize the nobility. Perhaps there were other nobles preventing him from helping,” I explained.

“Still, it was heartless. The ones who died were villagers.”

So that was why she had such contempt for the nobility. Sara believed that even the children of nobles who had no hand in the matter, such as myself, would eventually grow up to commit such crimes.

“Even the nobility have their issues, though,” I told her, recalling how tough their positions had seemed for Philip and Sauros. Philip had his schemes, but whatever you thought of old man Sauros, he’d cared about those he ruled over. Though he had seemed kind of violent in his approach to things.

Ultimately, those who ignored the people they ruled over were those who didn’t live among them, particularly those residing in the capital. They had no concern for their region or its citizens and impeded those who might otherwise help. Sauros was one such victim of that mindset, and lost his life for it.

Even so, I couldn't fault them entirely for what they did. The nobles lived in their own world and had their own battles. People tended to forget everything besides what was in front of them.

"S-sorry, did I offend you?" As I was preoccupied with such thoughts, Sara reached out, as if panicked by my silence, and cupped her hand over mine. Her palm was tough and unfeminine, calloused by drawing hundreds of thousands of arrows. Still, her grip was strong and warm.

"No, you haven't offended me. I was just remembering my relatives. They were noblemen and died during the Displacement Incident."

"Oh...so that was it. I'm sorry. Even though you may not be nobility, you're still acquainted with people who are."

"Please don't worry about that. I'm sure they're not related to what happened to your village."

Although, Philip had mentioned his brother's viciousness at one point, so perhaps the noble who'd held back aid from Sara's village had been someone related to the Boreas family? Plus, the village was located in the Milbotts Region, overseen by the very Notos Greyrat who Paul had run away from. It was highly likely that they *were* involved. That was a rather convoluted subject, though, so I didn't bring it up.

"Still, they died, didn't they?"

"They did."

"Then that was insensitive of me. I'm sorry."

I let her apologize, but really, it didn't bother me. Probably because the nobles she spoke of weren't anything like the ones I knew. Perhaps I was only lucky that Philip and Sauros were good people.

"Oh, um...this is a slight change of subject, but..."

“Yes?”

“Actually, you see, I kind of want to try using a sword a bit. It’s tough to use a bow at close range, so I thought I’d have Suzanne teach me how swordplay, for starters.”

It was an abrupt topic change, but it made sense, given how awkward the previous conversation had been. This was what it meant to “read the room.” A valuable skill another girl I knew didn’t possess.

“True; it’s not like you can just take your arrows and just stab monsters with them,” I agreed thoughtfully.

“Yeah. Not that I’ll have many opportunities to get that close as long as I’m in a party. That’s why I’ve been using my all-purpose knife instead of a sword so far. But, well, no surprise, it broke yesterday.” Sara took out the blade in question and set it down on the table. True to her words, a third of the knife had broken off. It could still be used for shaving wood and the like, but it would be useless for battle.

“Huh. I figured your bow would be the fastest to break.”

“I made the bow myself, so I can always make a new one if it breaks. I can use treant branches around these parts to make a pretty good one,” Sara explained.

Bows weren’t popular, so they weren’t typically sold at weapon shops. However, since the town had an abundance of wood for use in magical implements and staves, she took advantage of that to craft her own. The same went for her arrows, of course.

I wondered when she had found time to make them, but then recalled how she would whittle down wood with her knife before bed when we camped out. She likely had the feathers for the fletching prepared ahead of time, and crafted them whenever she was free.

“I’ve saved up a bit of money since we’ve had a run of successful missions lately, and I was thinking about buying a short sword.”

“All right.”

She pressed on. “So, Rudeus, are you free tomorrow? Want to go buy it with me? You’re an Intermediate-ranked swordfighter, so you can tell the difference between a good sword and a bad one, right?”

“Nope, I have absolutely no idea. But sure, let’s go together.”

“It’s a deal!” she declared, beaming.

“Ooh?”

“The two of you going off by yourselves? Now that’s charming.” A quick glance over at Suzanne and Timothy showed that the two were grinning. It was then that I realized what Sara’s invitation meant.

It was a date.

It had been a long time since I’d gone on a date. When *was* the last time I’d been on one, actually? It had to be back in the Holy Kingdom of Millis, when I went shopping for clothes with Eris. Back then, we based our purchases on people-watching.

Speaking of clothes, the only thing I had was my worn-out robe. I hadn’t had time to buy anything new, and for that matter, I had no fashion sense to begin with. I suppose could just mimic the local street style, but unfortunately, that weren’t that many fashionable people in Rosenburg to use as reference.

No, there was no need to be so particular about how I dressed. I was just accompanying her as she shopped. We were only going out to buy a single sword. I couldn’t get carried away thinking of it as a date. The two of us were getting along now, but that was all it was. I couldn’t let myself think that she was interested in me, or that this

might go somewhere. I wasn't a virgin anymore. Surely Sara wasn't getting all primped up, either.

Yeah, let's just go at this like we usually do, I told myself. *Be normal.* Today I would be natural—natural Rudeus.

"Sorry to keep you waiting. Let's go."

As I was preoccupied with these thoughts in the mess hall of the inn, Sara came to meet me. She was actually cute when I really looked at her. Petite, with a crop of smooth, short blonde hair and an inviting scent about her. Ah, it looked like she'd brushed out her hair; it had been pretty frizzy in our most recent mission together. Even her clothes were a bit different. She wasn't super dressed up, but I could tell she had put in some effort. Her usual leather breastplate and arrow quiver were nowhere to be seen, and she wore light clothes beneath her usual jacket. Not quite the height of fashion, but very few adventurers had much of a wardrobe. She had really tried to be presentable.

And now I understood just how dense I was. Apparently, she *was* interested in me. I suspected I knew the reason for it too—that incident in the forest. Without intending to, I'd somehow landed myself on her route. It was only crisis bonding, I was sure, but at least knowing the reason brought me some relief.

I didn't dislike her. She'd certainly been hostile toward me at first, but she had her reasons. She even apologized for her actions, though they never bothered me to begin with. Knowing she was interested in me stirred internal fear, but I wasn't entirely unhappy about it. I didn't have any particularly strong feelings for her, of course, but if this was the way things were going, why not just go with the flow? I wasn't a virgin anymore, after all!

No, calm down, I coached myself. *It's dangerous to bite off more than you can chew. You'll just be repeating the same mistake as last time. You need to maintain distance here.*

“What is it?” asked Sara.

“Nothing; let’s go.”

Sara stayed slightly ahead of me as we walked, still close enough to see each other with a sideways glance. It was an adventurer’s formation—close enough to be walking side-by-side, with the ability to instantly move next to each other if needed. However, she was a little closer today than usual. Close enough that our hands might touch.

“This is the place.”

Our destination was a weapons shop with a good reputation: the Remate Store, owned and operated by an enormous company headquartered in the Asuran capital of Arus, whose wares were largely imported from that kingdom. The company hadn’t been so well known until recently, when the quality of their imports increased sharply and their stores rapidly grew in popularity. In fact, the owner of the carriage I rode on when I left the Asura Kingdom must have been bringing merchandise to this very shop. Although the storefront looked rather ordinary, it would be a bit intimidating for adventurers.

“This place looks expensive,” I commented.

“Yeah, but I have the money, so I figured I’d buy something decent.”

The production of magical implements in Basherant was booming. As long as you could pay a fair price, you could get better quality items here than you could in Asura; but on the other hand, the selection was limited. I guess she picked this shop for the variety of its imports from the Asura Kingdom.

The value of a good short sword couldn’t be underestimated. When worst came to worst, a secondary weapon like that could save your life.

“Welcome!” One of the shop’s employees greeted us energetically when we entered. A plethora of weapons lay before us. The majority were long swords, but there were also staves, whips, and blunt weapons such as clubs and maces as well. The only things missing were weapons such as lances or spears. The people in this world avoided those, considering them “devils’ weapons” due to their use by the Superd Tribe. As an adventurer, you couldn’t afford to buy arms of such ill omen.

We casually perused their selection and made our way to the corner where the short swords were kept. The high-quality blades were displayed on the wall, while the medium-quality ones were arranged on shelves. The particularly cheap, low-quality ones were tossed in a box to be rummaged through.

We excluded the most expensive from consideration. They were enticing, to be sure, with several enchanted ones among them, but Sara didn’t possess the coin for that. We were generally looking at the mid-tier weapons. These were made by famous smiths, and while they possessed no special effects, they were sturdy, sharp and well-balanced. They cost a pretty penny, but they had the quality to match.

As for the cheapest of the lot, they weren’t bad if bought brand new, but if you weren’t attentive with maintenance, they’d wear out quickly. With frequent use, they might last two years. Most people thought of them as disposable weapons.

“It’s really hard to decide,” said Sara.

“Is it your first time being in a shop like this?”

“No, but as you know, I use a bow. Even my other short sword I bought cheap and secondhand at a street stall, and the bows I make myself.” Sara glanced over the options in front of her, carefully studying each one by picking it up to check the balance.

I had a knife of my own as well, though I couldn't quite recall where I'd bought it. Perhaps I picked it up at random on the Demon Continent? Wait, no, that one was worn out, so I think I switched it out for a new one in the King Dragon Realm. Maybe it was time for me to get another one.

With that thought in mind, I perused a few of the short swords as well. Some had longer blades, some had shorter ones, some were light, some were heavy. "Short sword" was a simple, categorical name, but there was a lot of variety within the category. I hadn't planned on buying one today, but it might be good to have one on hand, just in case.

"Hmm, maybe this? Or this... I wonder which one I should pick. Which do you think, Rudeus?"

When I glanced back, Sara had two blades in hand. One was slightly curved and twenty centimeters long, while the other was a straight thirty centimeters of steel.

"Let's see..." I tested each one in my hand. There was a clear difference in weight and balance. After I'd hefted them, I held up the short, curved one. "This would be better for shaving down wood for arrows." It had a more comfortable balance to it. That surely make it the better option for delicate work. "But if you want it for fighting monsters, then this one is better." I handed the other sword back to her. It had a long, thick blade and looked like it would make great impact when sweeping from the side. I had no idea how strong it actually was, though.

"All right...hmm."

I wasn't especially knowledgeable about swords, but she'd asked for my opinion and it would have been rude not to give an answer. "Don't you primarily use it for making arrows?" I asked.

"Yeah, but I want to be able to use it in an emergency situation, too."

“Then why don’t you buy both?”

Sara shook her head. “They would be too heavy. Plus, it would get in the way of using my bow if I had two swords hanging at my waist.”

“Then what about buying a cheap knife for crafting arrows which you can store in your bag? It could also be a backup weapon.”

“Yeah, that might work...” she started to say. “But that’s kind of a lot of money.”

“If you want, I could help you pay for it.”

Sara shook her head. “I’d feel bad.”

“You can let me help out occasionally,” I coaxed, taking some coin from my pocket.

Honestly, I’d barely spent anything this past year. I only spent on necessities, and even then, I didn’t use very much. My income far outmatched my daily expenses. Since I didn’t spend anything on entertainment, I’d wound up amassing some wealth. I had enough spare cash to be able to buy a short sword or two.

“Okay,” she finally agreed. “But I’m just borrowing the money.”

“All right. Just pay me back when you can, then.”

Sara was pretty particular when it came to paying debts. Even when I said I would treat her to a meal, she would insist she was just borrowing the cash. I didn’t really care whether she ever returned my money or not, but she was insistent on repaying it, so I’d ask her to compensate me in other ways instead, such as taking over my next round of lookout duty. Not that I minded her sincere attempts to reimburse me.

“Okay!” Sara really did look cute when she smiled.

Afterward, we surveyed the other shops in the area, which included shops selling armor and magical devices. Among the latter

was a shop that we normally never went into, full of exceedingly expensive wares on display. Adventurers didn't have much business with such stores; the products lining this storefront cost an entire year's worth of our income. So, of course, we just window-shopped.

Magical items in this world were largely things like household appliances or objects with Beginner-tier magic effects. Though research on these was progressing, the objects produced were relatively crude. For example, there was an item almost like a lighter that would spit fire if you channeled mana into it. It might sound like a convenient invention, but it was too unwieldy to haul around, being the size of my fist.

Once we were done window shopping, we went off to have a drink. We selected a fine-dining restaurant—just kidding! We went to our usual bar. We were both adventurers, after all, and Sara wasn't well-versed in fine dining etiquette. Such etiquette just reminded me of my past, too, so this worked better for me as well.

"Looking at all of that made me want a new breastplate, too," sighed Sara.

"I think I'm going to stick with this robe. I've taken a liking to it."

"How many years have you been wearing it?"

"Two or three years," I guessed.

"It's definitely durable," she agreed, "but the sleeves are starting to get a little frayed. Why not buy a new one?"

"Hmm. I'd rather wait until it's completely worn out."

"Well, maybe I'll do the same, then...but then again, mine is protective gear. I should probably replace it sooner. You never know what's going to happen in combat."

We chattered about the day's shopping trip as I ate my usual meat and bean soup, plus a vegetable salad only available in the summer. Now that I thought about it, Eris hadn't been too enthused

about this kind of talk. Neither of us were the type to spend much time shopping, nor did we have an interest in clothing. Eris wasn't terribly gifted when it came to words, either.

This was actually pretty fun, though.

"It doesn't look like it's taken too much damage, though," I commented, referring to her breastplate.

"Yeah, but I bought it quite a while ago, so it's been starting to get tight."

"Tight...?" What did that mean? She was about fifteen; by this world's standards, she was already an adult, although she was still in the process of puberty. And puberty meant the growth of certain areas.

"What are you blushing for?" She scowled at me. I still lacked experience when it came to conversation, apparently. "Sheesh, honestly, men."

Even so, I don't think I fared too badly. Sara didn't appear too displeased or exasperated with me.

"Ahh, I think I've gotten a bit tipsy. I tend to drink a lot when I'm with you," Sara confided after a few drinks.

"Really?"

"Yeah. For some reason...I just tend to relax when you're beside me," she said, leaning her body against mine. Our shoulders brushed, and I could feel her body heat filtering through the fabric of her clothes.

This is what I think it is, right? As in, I actually have a chance here?

To test my hypothesis, I wrapped my arm around her waist. I expected her to be muscular, but she was actually soft and slender. Honestly, this simple touch was enough to satisfy me for the day. Or

so I thought, but then she wrapped her hand over mine. Eyes slightly moist, she glanced at me. “Rudeus...”

“S-Sara...” Our bodies seemed to press even closer together.

Okay, I decided, let's do this.

I figured it was about time to forget about the past and move on. I couldn't cling to it forever. Just a year ago, I had resolved to look ahead and move forward. That meant leaving Eris behind and moving on to the next romance.

That was right. Things with Eris were over. I needed to start a new chapter. There was no time to waste.

I pulled my arm back and stood. “It's, uh, getting late. How about we go back? I'll walk you to your room.”

Still, I had to be cautious. I couldn't let myself get all carried away again like I did with Eris. If this romance ended like the last one, I might not be able to get back on my feet again. I needed to wait for the right timing. Right, Paul?

As I mulled that over, we paid our bill and headed outside. The moment we did, Sara suddenly pressed herself against me. “I kind of want to talk to you a little bit more.” Her words slurred together a bit. Her cheeks were flushed and her head swayed. Perhaps she'd drunk a bit too much—but then again, maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

As for me, in case you were wondering, I hadn't consumed a drop. “Um, well, shall we go to another bar?”

“Hmm.” She tapped her finger against her chin and glanced up at the sky. Then, completely nonchalant, she murmured, “Can we go to your room?”

Did she understand what she was saying? No—even if she didn't, I just had to resist the temptation.

Wait, wait. Maybe I didn't have to resist her?

Just go with the flow, I told myself, *go with the flow*. We had a great mood going just a moment ago. As long as she was fine with it, there was surely nothing wrong with just letting things take their natural course. “Uh, um, w-well! Let’s get going then, shall we?”

“Okay,” she agreed, unusually meek as she smoothly linked her arm with mine. Her breasts, neither particularly large nor small, pressed against my arm. The heat from them felt like it would scorch me. They were so soft, so *truly*, truly soft.

The girls of this world—both Eris and Sara—sure were assertive.

Once again, I got the sudden and distinct feeling something was off. What *was* this sensation, exactly? I felt like I’d experienced it before, but something was different this time. I mean, when I touched Eris’ chest I’d felt this spark, this feeling, and I wasn’t getting that this time. Something was lacking.

Well, no matter. For now I would let myself be entranced by the softness of Sara’s breasts.

Wait, no, calm down! I urged myself. *As long as you can establish the right mood, you’ll be able to feel her breasts with more than just your upper arm.*

I felt my heart pounding thunderously. My breathing didn’t sound too erratic, did it?

“We’re here,” I announced.

“Yeah, you’re on the third floor, right?” asked Sara.

We returned to the inn with our arms entwined, and the owner looked surprised when he saw us. He snickered and disappeared into the kitchen before immediately returning and tossing something my way. I caught it instinctively. It was a flask. I knew nothing about types of alcohol, but this was likely quite expensive. He waved his hand at me as if to say *Good luck*, then retreated into the kitchen.

I studied Sara's face, but it told me little. Her cheeks were no longer that flushed, nor was she so hammered that she'd lost consciousness. I had no idea what she was thinking, either.

"What? Hurry up and take me to your room," she urged.

So I led her up the stairs. The inn was deathly quiet, with few people occupying its rooms. The steps creaked as we climbed to the next floor, and my heart hammered along, unbidden.

Yep, my breathing had *definitely* grown erratic.

"Here," I said.

"Thanks for letting me in." Sara entered the room without making any comments about my irregular breathing.

I set the flask I'd just received on my table. Then I began by taking off my robe—wait, no. First I needed to start a fire. No! It was already summer now; we didn't need one. I ended up taking off my robe after all.

As I shuffled around furtively, unable to settle my mind, Sara had already taken her jacket off, hung it up, and was now perched on my bed. That's right, my bed. Not the chair right beside it, but the bed itself. It felt like it was the first time I'd ever had a girl sit on my bed, but that couldn't be true. "W-would you like something to drink? I've got alcohol and water."

"You have water?" she asked, surprised.

"I'm a magician, so I can make it."

"Aha."

Trying to stall for time, I filled a cup with water. Wait, had I washed this cup? I was pretty lazy when it came to that kind of stuff. Uhh...

"Forget about that, come over here," she said.

"Yes!" Going right now! I moved as if magnetically pulled and sat beside her, right on the spot she'd softly patted to beckon me over.

Our bodies sat close together. Insanely close. Way too freakin' close, oh my god.

"You know..." Sara began.

"Yes."

"I'm really grateful to you. If you hadn't come for me back then, I'd be dead."

"Yes."

She just wanted to have a serious conversation? That's what all this was about? Our shoulders were already touching, and the only things I could see were the pale white skin of her clavicle and the swell of breasts just beneath. Despite all of that, she wanted me to try to have a serious conversation with her?

Suddenly, she glanced my way. Our eyes met, faces so close that our noses nearly bumped. Her face filled my vision, and I found my reflection in the blue of her irises.

"That's why...um...you can do it."

I shoved her down onto the bed. There was no etiquette, no manners. I didn't think I used too much strength, though. I forced back my eagerness by reminding myself I wasn't a virgin anymore and moved as gently and kindly as I could. I acted meticulously—cautiously—so as not to make any mistakes. So the past wouldn't repeat itself.

I laid her down, kissed her, caressed her, removed her clothes, caressed some more, kissed her again, and then peeled off my own clothes. That was when...

"Huh?"

I realized.

"...Huh?"

I *finally* realized what had been ping-pong in my head all this time.

Sara's body was slender, toned, beautiful and white, with distinct tan lines drawing borders where her clothes had been. There was no issue with her at all. She had a gorgeous body, a wonderful body. One that left nothing to be desired. It wasn't like she had a stick of meat between her legs where there shouldn't be one, either.

No, there was nothing wrong with her at all. The problem was with me. My body was the one raising a red flag. Or, to be more precise: It *wasn't* raising a flag. It wasn't raising anything at all. It was completely unresponsive.

"...What?"

Normally, in this type of situation, my member would be saluting proudly, as if it had been awaiting this moment. This was my son, my comrade-in-arms that had been with me for the last fifteen years.

"...Eh?"

And he wasn't standing up.

We tried a variety of things. I tried stimulating myself. I tried having Sara touch me. I tried rubbing myself against her. Still it just continued to hang limply. Finally, once we were exhausted, we pulled away from each other and wordlessly maintained some distance. I sat in the chair while she lingered on the bed.

My head was an absolute mess. This was the first time this had ever happened.

Why? How? When...when did this start? This was totally weird! Why this, all of a sudden, after it had been so naughty and unruly up until now?

What was happening to my body?

My vision narrowed and my mouth grew dry. Only my heart continued to pound strongly as I sank into confusion, aware that my

face must be pale as a sheet. I felt pathetic, anxious, and grief-stricken.

“Hey,” Sara called out. At some point she had pulled her clothes back on. Not just her underwear and her underclothes, but the jacket she’d shrugged off when we first came in, too. She was no longer sitting on the bed either, of course. Now she’d wandered over to the door, where she stood with her back towards me. “It’s not like...I had feelings for you or anything.”

“Huh?”

She didn’t turn around as she spoke. Her words came quick, as if to push me away. “It was...a way of thanking you. Yeah, to pay you back for what you did. So don’t go getting the wrong idea. The only reason I even did this was because I felt obligated.”

“What?” Obligated? So the whole reason she spent time with me this entire time was out of obligation? She only acted so sweet to me because I’d helped her and she felt like she owed me? It had nothing to do with liking me, was that it?

“B-bye then!” she said as she opened the door and slipped out of the room.

“Ah, wai—”

Just before she was completely out the door, I heard her mutter, “What a disaster.” Stricken, I pulled myself back and swallowed my exclamation. Her footsteps down the stairs filtered into the room.

“...Ah.”

I was at a loss for words. Despite everything, it had happened again.

Where did I go wrong? I must have messed something up again, right? Had this perhaps been how Eris had felt, too? Had she actually been entirely unwilling that night and merely endured her distaste until the very end, for my sake?

Why was this happening? Was this how things were always going to be from now on?

“It’s cold.”

Feeling chilled, I pulled my underwear back on. I donned my pants and shirt and shrugged the robe back over my shoulders. Even then, I still felt cold. It was the kind of cold that froze you all the way to your core, the kind where you simply couldn’t get warm no matter how many layers of clothes you had on. It was the kind of chill that needed something else to drive it away.

“I guess this will work.” I picked up the flask I’d left on the table.

Chapter 6: The Impotent Magician

An hour later, I had emptied that flask. I made my stumbling way outside and went into a random bar. I then immediately sat myself down at the counter and ordered. “Master, give me the strongest alcohol you have here.”

“For a kid? We don’t have—” He started to object, but his expression turned to one of surprise when I plucked an Asuran gold coin from my pocket and deposited it onto the counter. The surprise was soon replaced by disgust as he immediately reached for a bottle on the shelf behind him and set it down in front of me. *Why keep me waiting when you have what I asked for?* I thought sourly.

“Ahh...” I drank straight from the bottle, hoisting it, throwing my head back, and gulping it all down. I’d never drunk alcohol like this, but it felt surprisingly good. My head was spinning round and round. Acute alcohol poisoning? Who cared about that? It would be a dream come true if I could die feeling this good.

“Hey, old man, one more! Give me somethin’ to munch on, too.”

“Hey, you shouldn’t be drinking like that.”

“Lay off! Hurry up and bring me the booze!” I snapped back, so the barkeep just shrugged and provided me the next bottle.

Ahh, this sure brought back memories. This was exactly how things were in my previous life. I’d lash out in anger, and my mom and dad, terrified, would do exactly as I asked. Hah, after living in this world for so many years and coming this far, here I was repeating history again.

Dammit, dammit...!

I took another swig. The alcohol here was fiery hot going down and strong enough to make your tongue hurt. The taste didn’t

matter, though. The more I drank, the less I felt the biting cold that had iced me over inside.

The snacks the barkeep supplied were just beans. Roasted beans, specifically. What were they called again? I'd eaten them several times, but I couldn't remember. Whatever, I could just call them beans. After all, this town had little else besides beans.

"Oho, what's this?"

As I was greedily popping these beans into my mouth and chasing them down with alcohol, I heard a voice behind me.

"Well, if it ain't Quagmire. It's unusual, ya know, for you to come drink here at a bar we frequent all the time. But hey, you'll ruin the booze if you stay here. So get out. You listening to me? Hey! Look at me, I'm talking to you."

Soldat came and plopped himself down on the stool beside me. I looked over. He wore the same maliciously mocking expression he always did.

"What the hell is with you and that depressing look on your face? Let me guess, something awful happened? Not surprising... Not that it matters. You're always like this, aren't you? Whenever something doesn't go your way, you run and run, smile like a complete moron and wait for those around you to comfort you. Right? That's exactly what—urgh?!"

His face had gotten too close, so I sent my fist into it. Soldat went reeling off the chair from the impact and landed square on his ass, though he immediately hopped back to his feet. "You little shit!"

I jumped off the stool and grabbed him by the collar. "What are you getting pissed about?! You're the one always picking fights with me. This is exactly what you wanted, isn't it?!"

"You—"

I punched him again. Soldat didn't defend himself, nor did he try to avoid it. He just took my fist right to his face and stumbled a few steps.

"What's wrong with smiling like a moron?" Another punch. "If I could be like you—if I could disparage and belittle other people while boasting about my own achievements, even as people resented me and my heart filled with jealousy as they all began to hate me and turn away—if I could go through all that and still have your kind of attitude, I would!"

I continued, "I don't want people to hate me. That's why I smile like that! What bothers you so much about that, huh?!" The words just kept coming. "Why do they all leave?! Just stay with me! I don't care if it's a lie, smile for me! It hurts when you're cruel to me!"

I couldn't restrain myself.

"Whatever, it's all ruined. It's all over for me. Besides, what the hell is your problem? You don't know a thing about me and yet you're always taking potshots at me. Who are you calling a 'hotshot lone wolf' and 'half-assed' anyways? What's wrong with running away when things get tough?!" I just kept going. "Fuck! Go ahead and come at me. Punch me, do whatever you like. Then, when I'm sprawled out on the floor, you can look down at me and laugh! You're probably stronger than me, anyway."

I rained punch after punch down on him as I bellowed that rant. The others in the bar began to jeer at us, saying, "It's a fight! Give it to him!" Yet Soldat didn't move. Surely, he could have reacted to my attacks, but instead he continued to let my alcohol-addled body take limp swings at him.

Gradually, the voices around us died down. The only thing left, once I had exhausted myself and sunk to the floor, was the sound of me choking out a sob.

"Hey, Soldat... Don't pick on the kid too much."

“R-right.”

Everyone in the bar, including the members of Stepped Leader who were drinking in the back, and even Soldat himself were all completely dumbfounded as they stared at me.

“Sorry. It was my bad. I screwed up. Maybe you really do have it worse than everyone else. Don’t cry. I’m sure good things await you in the future.”

“What the hell would you know?” I spat back.

“Hmm... Ah, uh, well, drink up. Then you can tell me about it. Maybe then we can figure something out, or you can at least get it off your chest. So...dry those tears,” he said, smacking me on the shoulder.

And then somehow, before I even realized what was happening, Soldat and I were drinking together.

“So, basically, you couldn’t get it up and the girl dumped you, huh?”

“*Sniff*... What, you trying to make fun of me?” I asked accusingly.

“Nah, not at all. It’s just important when you’re feeling down to figure out what exactly caused it.”

“I guess so.”

To my surprise, Soldat quietly listened to me as I sobbed and recounted what happened. He even kept the other members of Stepped Leader at a distance and led me to a corner of the counter where it was just the two of us.

“So, Mister Soldat, what really had me so terribly upset was—”

“Just loosen up,” he interjected.

“Huh?”

“Just a moment ago, you were talking like a normal person. You don’t gotta put up a mask by speaking all stiff and formal. You’re just lying to yourself when you do that,” Soldat explained.

“All right...”

“You keep lying to yourself and it’s like a poison that builds. It’s fine to be polite, but be yourself.”

Considering the last year, maybe he had a point.

“So what got me so down was actually something that happened before this. There was this girl I liked.”

“Yeah?”

“A lot happened and, well, we did...I mean, *you know*. It was the first time for both of us.”

“Well, everyone’s got a first.”

I continued, “When I woke up, she was gone and had already set off on some trip.”

“So she cast you aside, huh?”

Cast me aside? The truth of those words was like a blade that stabbed me in the throat. Fresh tears came bubbling to my eyes and my hand trembled as I held my cup, another sob slipping out.

“I said quit the tears. Anyway, if you’re crying about it, that must be the source of your problem. You’ve been holding on to that this whole time, and it’s what got you where you are now. Okay. I get what happened. Now come on, bottoms up. Drink back those tears,” he said, pouring more of the expensive liquor into my cup.

I threw my head back and guzzled it. My stomach felt completely numb. I had no sense of just how much I’d drunk, though my tears were beginning to subside.

“Why did she... Why did Eris leave me? Why—”

“Ahh, so her name’s Eris, eh? She’s a cruel woman. But you can’t waste time wondering what the reason is behind a woman’s every move. Women are like cats. We’re more like dogs. There’s no way dogs and cats can understand what the other’s thinking, right?”

“But still, why? For what reason...?”

“Hmm. Based on my experience, when a woman suddenly disappears like that, it’s because you screwed up something immediately before that. They suddenly get all pissy and go off on their own, saying they don’t care anymore.”

“Something I did immediately before,” I echoed, thinking. There was one thing that came to mind. “So I guess I really did suck in bed...”

“Best not to come to your own conclusions about what got her so riled up. Whatever you come up with is probably gonna be wrong, so be careful with that. If you apologize thinking that’s it, they’ll get pissed at you and yell, ‘I’m not even upset about *that!*’”

“I don’t even know where she is, so I can’t apologize,” I confessed.

“Yeah, I get that. I do.” Soldat drained the rest of his cup. After he set it back down, he drew his thumb over the edge, wiping away the beads of liquid there. After looking contemplative for a few moments, he mumbled, “It’s just gonna be depressing if you keep going like this.”

Those words perfectly captured my feelings. Soldat’s expression hadn’t changed. He still had that look of utter resentment at the world—that sarcastic, mocking expression. Still, that was just his face. His eyes were looking right at me and his words were sincere.

“Let’s fix it,” he said finally.

“But how?”

“Not a clue.” He shook his head and continued, “But if *that* is the source of your problem, you just gotta override it with the same thing.”

Override it with sex. Sex, however, meant that I would have to use the very thing that wasn’t standing up for me right now though, right? Fixing it would require the very thing that was broken to temporarily return to working order. “Isn’t that impossible?”

“You’ve only done it once, yeah?”

“...Yeah.”

“Then who knows? Listen up, finding pleasure doesn’t necessarily mean you gotta stick it in a hole.”

I kind of understood what he was getting at. Certainly, he was right. Adult videos couldn’t be two hours long if not, and there wouldn’t be so many kinds of them out there.

“What do you propose then?” I asked.

“Let’s leave it to a pro.”

At Soldat’s suggestion, we headed off to Rosenberg’s pleasure district.

It was my first time here, and indeed, my first time stepping into any red-light district at all. More precisely, I’d deliberately avoided coming near this place.

The sun had already faded in the sky, the brothels were all lit up, and a respectable number of people wandered the streets around them. The majority of these people were men, but there were also a sizeable number of women. Most of them were there to work, but from what I overheard, some were also here as customers looking for men. All of them wore such heavy makeup that it was difficult for me to discern one from the other.

No, the women beneath the eaves, puffing on what resembled cigarettes, were unmistakably employed here. They wore suggestive clothing with their breasts exposed. I could tell by the way they were glancing over at me—no, at Soldat—that they were trying to attract customers.

“Th-this is my first time in a place like this,” I confided.

“I know.”

“Wh-what kind of girl should I pick?”

“Nah, you don’t have to pick someone from here. These girls, to put it bluntly, are the kind that just lie there if you pay them. I’m fine with that, but you’re not like me.”

“Oh, okay.” So even prostitutes had varying skill levels and services, huh? And the low-ranked ones were, in every sense of the word, selling *only* their bodies. That definitely wasn’t the kind of partner I was looking for.

“We’re going somewhere a little more special,” declared Soldat.

“Oh, special, huh?”

“Well, I say ‘special,’ but there’s a lot of variety to be had. There are places that’ll let you do things a run-of-the-mill brothel wouldn’t, and the kind that’ll satisfy whatever secret fetishes you got. And there’s even more crooked establishments out there—places people refuse to talk about.”

More unscrupulous than the other ones he mentioned? I felt like I only had a vaguest idea of what he was talking about.

“For now, we’re just going to your standard brothel. A place with skilled professionals that’ll use techniques like you’ve never seen before. It’ll really knock your socks off.”

Just hearing about it was enough to get me excited. I’d never been to such a place before, not even in my previous life. I’d been interested even back then, but had also been the type to haughtily

claim that only idiots went to such places. I was young—young and foolish.

Right now, in contrast, all I felt was anticipation. But my buddy between my legs didn't seem to agree.

"Soldat... Sir, have you been to these kinds of places a lot?"

"Drop the 'sir'. And, well, yeah. I'm a man, why not?"

"But don't you have a woman in your party?"

"That's against in the rules in our party, or rather, amongst our clan. Parties are just a gathering of adventurers based on their skills. The rule is, if a man and woman in a party are discovered to be in a relationship, they're driven out of the clan."

"Oh, okay."

In an online game I'd played in my previous life, we'd had problems with romantic relationships. Players would meet offline, start dating, and then things would get awkward for the entire guild when the relationship turned sour. We also had trolls who were just there to make trouble.

This, however, was a different world. No one had an avatar to hide behind, and the fallout of relationship drama could endanger adventurers' lives. That was probably why there were such strict rules against it, particularly in sizable clans.

"But still," I protested, "being in life-or-death situations for days on end just naturally creates those kinds of bonds between men and women."

"It does," agreed Soldat. "That's why we're so strict about replacing members. If a leader senses those kinds of feelings between two people, they're asked to leave immediately."

"But you've been with them for so long. What happens to your teamwork when you suddenly bring a new person in?"

“Well, we just rework the basic battle guidelines administered by the clan, and a little practice does the rest. It still takes a bit of time, but that’s why leaders like me are proactive about putting forward recommendations for new members. Anyway, we’re here.” Soldat stopped in his tracks. “Come on, follow me.”



Before us was a building, bewitching with its red paint and lit bonfires. It looked too intimidating to enter; I would normally never even approach such a place, let alone go inside.

Yet as I hurried after Soldat, I found myself crossing the threshold with no problem. I used to wonder how someone as unpleasant as Soldat could lead an adventurer's party, but now I kind of got it. He was strangely easy to follow, somewhat like Suzanne. You could trust either of them to lead you places.

"Don't act so nervous. Oh, you got money, right?"

"I...I think I have enough." There was something at the entrance resembling a list of available options, and I confirmed that the cash in my wallet was more than enough to pay for the most expensive option they offered.

"You've been saving all your money, right? Then you should be fine—at least for a night. You'll be screwed if you get hooked and start coming back every night."

When we entered, we were greeted by a rainbow of colors, with elegant upholstery that stretched as far as the eye could see. To our right was a counter, and to our left were about six women in dresses, all seated. Instead of the gaudy makeup of their peers standing outside, they wore only enough to accentuate their natural beauty, making them look both seductive and sensuous. This was likely one of their many skills.

At a glance, I could tell their dresses and the furnishings were expensive stuff. Luxury prostitutes, as their name implied, gave off a sense of grandeur.

"Those are some amazing dresses," I commented.

"Yeah, apparently they're imports from the Asura Kingdom. They're dresses made for real nobility, but merchants avoid taxes and sell them at a decent price by transporting them in separate pieces, and then people sew them together."

“Y-you’re awfully knowledgeable about that.”

“Heard about it the last time I came here. The leader of the Remate chain, Silent, came up with the idea. That’s how Remate got so big recently.”

“Oh, wow.” This was definitely of interest to me, but I didn’t have the time or money for it right now.

Soldat made a beeline for the counter and rested his elbow on it. “Yo.”

“My, my, if it isn’t Lord Soldat. Welcome to our humble establishment. Ah, but I regret to inform you that your preferred companion is currently booked full.”

“I’m just here to drink today. But it’s my buddy’s first time here, so could you explain how things work?” He backed away from the counter and pushed me forward.

I stepped toward the receptionist as bidden. The person on the other side of the counter was an elegant man with a pleasant smile, and though I clearly looked like a child in his eyes, he still regarded me with the utmost courtesy. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” he said. “Allow me to extend my gratitude to you for choosing to visit our establishment, the Blue Rose Palace, today. I am the manager of this place, Profen.”

“Oh, nice to meet you. I’m Rudeus Greyrat.”

“Ah! You’re Quagmire Rudeus! I’ve heard rumors of you for quite some time now.” What kind of rumors? Part of me wanted to know and the other part didn’t. “Lord Soldat mentioned that it’s your first time here. If I might ask, does that mean it will also be your very first time ever?”

“Oh, no, it’s not.” I shook my head.

“Very well, then. I shall explain to you how our system works.” And he laid it out.

First, you would pick from one of the girls waiting in the chairs. Next, price was determined based on the itinerary you selected. Itineraries had a bunch of different options, and anything that wasn't listed was simply off the table. You would be handed a list of what was permissible and what wasn't, of course, but typically a patron didn't have to fuss too much over the specifics. The escorts had already memorized everything on the lists.

Once you'd chosen, you would enter one of the baths to clean up, and then be guided to a room. There, the woman you had chosen would join you, and the two of you would be alone together to do whatever you wanted. As long as what you wanted was on the list, she would oblige you. If you proposed something not on the list, she would refuse, and that would be that.

That said, if you *really* had your heart set on something not on the list, you might be able to negotiate for its inclusion at the cost of an additional fee. Of course, the establishment had numerous methods at their disposal to make sure you ponied up. You paid seventy percent up front, and thirty percent plus any additional fees after.

"So, who you gonna pick?"

On Soldat's recommendation, I picked the most expensive itinerary available and quickly settled the first half of the bill. This would allow me to try a variety of different methods to resolve my problem. After that, I sized up the women who were waiting. Since I was a paying customer, I was allowed to take a closer look and even feel them up if I wanted. There were a variety of escorts available, both young and old ones alike. Each wore a dazzling smile as I approached, smiles so seductive that I might have fallen for their wearers if we'd encountered each other literally anywhere but here.

Four of the seats were empty, which probably meant those girls were already seeing other customers. Even so, I felt a bit uncomfortable feeling up someone who was smiling at me, so...

“I guess...I’ll go with her.”

The girl I picked was the second from the left. She looked just a bit shy of twenty and was a tad shorter than me. She had sizeable breasts, a tight waist, and a nice round ass. Her facial features looked Asuran, with elongated eyes that slanted down slightly. She had a confident air about her, and reddish, curly hair that was set in waves.

In other words, her physical appearance resembled Eris’.

“I’m Elise. A pleasure to be in your company.”

Even her name sounded similar. No—it probably wasn’t her real name, anyway.

“Might I request your name as well, my lord?”

“Oh, Rudeus. Rudeus Greyrat.”

She looked shocked for a moment, but then her lips creased. “Well then, Lord Rudeus, I look forward to serving you.” Elise wore an enchanting smile on her face as she quickly turned on her heel and disappeared into another room.

“Well, good luck,” said Soldat. “I’ll come back for you when your time is up.”

“O-okay.”

Once he said that, Soldat selected the furthest girl to the right and disappeared somewhere else. I felt suddenly helpless now that I was alone.

“This way to the bath. Please feel free to take your time cleaning up, as it doesn’t count toward your allotted time with your companion.”

I brushed away the feeling of loneliness and followed the guide, wandering deeper into the building. The bathing area included a tub overflowing with warm water and two girls wearing what amounted to bathing suits. They were quite young, too, flat chested and lacking the body of a mature woman's figure. The two of them silently set about washing me. Perhaps these girls were apprentices, not yet old enough to take customers, but merely learning the skills as potential candidates to become escorts themselves. They scrubbed every inch of my body. And when I said they cleaned every inch, I meant it. They even brushed my teeth and polished me until I sparkled. Were my lower half in its proper state, my comrade-in-arms would have surely stood at attention and saluted the heavens. However, as always, he was completely silent.

Once I had donned the underwear and shirt they provided, putting my clothes and valuables in a basket they'd given me, I was told to go to Room 5.

I left the bath through a different door than I had entered, then took a narrow hallway to arrive at the designated room. With the numbers clearly written on the door, it was easy to spot. Rooms after door 6 were upstairs.

I timidly opened the door. Just the thought that there was a girl waiting on the other side, willing to do anything within the rules of this establishment, got me excited. And yet my precious partner down below remained uninterested. "Pardon me," I automatically said as I stepped inside.

It was dark in the room. The only light came from a number of candelabra and some candles on the table. In that dim light was a canopy bed. Elise stood at its edge, dressed in sheer clothing.

"I've been waiting for you, Lord Rudeus. Please, come this way." She smiled softly as she approached me, taking my arm. Elise was clearly different from Sara, with the way her prominent chest

pressed against my arm. My heart drummed furiously. "Shall we begin immediately? Or would you prefer a bit of conversation first?"

"Uh, um..."

"It seems you're nervous. In that case, why don't we chat a bit? Don't worry, the night is still young. There's no need to rush."

Ahh, so *this* was a professional. It was easy to tell by the way she conducted herself and spoke as she settled beside me on the bed. With practiced hands, she took a bottle of alcohol from the table and poured it into one of the provided cups. "Would you like to have a drink?" she asked.

"Uh, yes, I would."

Persuaded by her offer, I drained the glass dry. For a moment I wondered if she wouldn't join me, but then I remembered seeing it written at the entrance that companions wouldn't drink. There was also a warning that if a patron insisted their companion join them, her skills might be dulled and her words less filtered due to inebriation. So I would drink alone for now. The walk here had sobered me up from earlier. What happened after this would be essential, so I needed the influence of alcohol to help me along.

"These sweets are from the Asura Kingdom. Would you like some?"

"Y-yeah."

When I did as Elise suggested and ate one, she giggled. "I've heard of you before, Lord Rudeus."

"Oh, yeah... Well, I have become pretty famous at the Adventurers' Guild. That's true. I guess you must have heard of me from another adventurer?"

"No, from my little sister. You once healed her wounds without asking anything in return."

"'Once'?" I echoed questioningly.

“I heard it was last winter, as you were helping clear the snow.”

“Ohh.” Something like that *had* happened, come to think of it.

“Adventurers are kind to us when we dress up like this, put on make-up and touch skin to skin, but many of them tend to be quite violent, otherwise. Particularly toward the young understudies here, who have no money, whose clothes are in tatters, and who are often mistaken for orphans. Many adventurers don’t stop to consider that, as those children get older, they will be taking patrons, and that those very same adventurers may become their customers.”

A filthy orphan in the backstreets and a beautiful woman accepting patrons at a brothel seemed worlds apart. If I had bothered to look closer, I might have realized that the children who bathed me earlier looked like the urchins I sometimes spotted in back alleys during the day. “I think you must be right. I admit, I thought they were orphans too.”

“But you were different than the rest,” she insisted. “You sought nothing in return and helped what you thought was a penniless orphan out of the kindness of your heart. You are an incredible person. There’s been talk that some girls would go the extra distance to please you if you happened to visit them in the future.”

This definitely had to be lip service, I was sure. Still, it was nice to hear.

“I am sure the other girls will be jealous once they hear that I was the one who got to sleep with you.”

“Uh, yeah, sure... Um, could I have another glass?”

“Yes, certainly. But you mustn’t drink yourself into a stupor, you know? We have so much time left tonight. Rather than enjoying the liquor, why don’t you try enjoying me instead?”

“Oh, of course. Yes.”

After eating and drinking, my brain felt sufficiently addled with alcohol. As for Elise, she sat by my side the entire time, glued to my arm, her hand caressing my thigh all the way up to the base of my leg while saying, “Does it taste good?” and, “You can certainly hold your liquor.”

“Um, can we start now?” I asked finally.

“Certainly.” Elise released my arm, which she’d been clinging to the entire time, and stepped in front of me. “Would you like to undress me yourself?”

“Uh, what? Oh, no, that’s fine.”

“Very well.”

The way she moved as she stripped off her sheer garments was so seductive that it was bewitching.

“Now then, Lord Rudeus, to the bed.”

Her naked body kept me rooted in place as I fumbled at my own clothes. Once they were off, I followed her invitation and joined her on top of the mattress.

“I will do my utmost to please you.”

The whole situation was so sensual it felt like an illusion, as if I were in a dream. It was enough to make me believe, *Oh yeah, I can definitely do this.*

Simply put, it didn’t work.

“I am so sorry I wasn’t able to be of use to you.”

The moment I got in bed with her, Elise immediately realized my problem. She then proceeded to apologize profusely, asking me if I would prefer to choose someone else to be with. It wasn’t a bad

idea, but I would've felt guilty, so I explained my circumstances. That made her determined to help me, using every technique she possessed—including some not listed on my selected itinerary.

Honestly, she was wonderful. It felt great. I got a clear taste of what a professional's skills were like. However, the physical sensations led nowhere. My buddy remained ever silent, almost as if his two boys below had been cut off. In fact, the more we tried, the emptier I felt, and the further we seemed from discovering the source of the problem.

Then our time was up. "No, Miss Elise, you did your best," I assured her.

"Even so, I... Oh no, what should I do..."

"I'll pay the fee. For the things that weren't listed as well, if you'll tell me the cost."

"No, you don't have to worry about that. I did that because I genuinely wanted to help you."

True, I hadn't asked her to do those things. But I got a clear sense that she normally wouldn't have done them without the appropriate compensation, though. "Are you sure?" I asked, uncomfortable.

"I meant what I said to you earlier. Some of us swore we would put in more effort to please you if you were to come here."

I couldn't hide my disbelief. "Oh. Really?"

"I heard you were still quite young, however, so I didn't think you would be coming here for some time," confessed Elise.

A mix of flattery and truth, then. "I'll take your word for it," I decided.

"But since it's true that I wasn't able to satisfy you, would you at least permit me to escort you outside the pleasure district?"

"Uh, sure."

As prompted, I left the room with her and we walked together down the narrow hallway. Halfway down it, I felt someone behind us and glanced over my shoulder. I spotted some young girls slipping into the bedroom we'd just left. They carried cleaning supplies, and I guessed they were in charge of tidying the rooms once customers were finished. I recognized one of them—pretty sure she was the girl whose frostbite I had healed. "I guess what you said earlier really was true," I remarked with surprise.

"You didn't believe me?"

"I thought it was lip service."

When I answered her honestly, she just coiled her fingers around my upper arm and stroked it. "To tell the truth, it partly was."

"I figured."

"But ten years from now, when that girl starts taking customers of her own, I am sure what she will give you will be sincerity, not flattery."

Was she trying to convince me to become a repeat customer? I decided to take her words with a grain of salt as we made our way back to the lobby.

We couldn't convince the clerk to waive my fees. However, on Elise's personal request, I was given additional time with her, though anything she did during that span would be without compensation.

"I'm told Lord Soldat is drinking next door."

I followed Elise's directions and wandered to the neighboring bar. Since it was operated by the same company, I could get there by walking through this building rather than stepping back outside. Perhaps those who weren't here for sex came here instead, to drink alongside fledgling escorts who were old enough to do the work, but not yet ready to take customers of their own. Here, apprentices of

the art could practice and refine their conversational skills until they could flatter as naturally as Elise. Of course, they were probably given guidance elsewhere to develop their other skills.

“So that’s when I told ’em ‘Just one blow, that’s all I need to wipe out these beasts in front of us. You guys just focus on the enemies to our sides and flank.’”

“Aaah! Lord Soldat, you are so sexy!”

“Yeah! You do think I’m sexy, don’t ya?”

Soldat was in the back enjoying his drink while two girls attended to him. When he saw me approach, he immediately stood. “Oh, Quagmire! How’d it go?”

“She tried a number of different techniques on me, but...nothing worked.”

“Ahh, so it was a dud.” Soldat scratched at his head and heaved a sigh. “How the hell should we fix this?” He folded his arms, apparently mulling it over, but I had already given up. In fact, it felt as though my heart might shatter if I kept trying in vain.

“Hey you, what do you think?” Soldat turned the conversation to Elise.

“Me?” she asked, surprised. “I’m afraid I don’t have an answer, beyond regretting that I couldn’t be of more help.”

Soldat remained undeterred. “How did he compare to your other customers? Was there anything that stuck out to you?”

Elise was stunned. “I couldn’t possibly compare him to other customers, that would be—”

“Come on, just say it,” Soldat urged gruffly as her gaze quickly flitted between the two of us.

“Lord Rudeus seems to be...well, frightened of women. He came across as very timid whenever he talked to me, looked at me, or touched me.”

“Go on.”

“Perhaps if his partner were someone he didn’t have to be afraid of, someone he could be certain wouldn’t hate him no matter how things turned out, he might be able to do it.”

“You got anyone like that?” He looked at me.

I shook my head. For a moment I pictured Roxy in my mind, but that was hopeless. Roxy was the person I most respected in the entire world, and therefore the number one person I didn’t want to hate me. In other words, the exact opposite what Elise was proposing.

“I don’t think that’s something he will find immediately. It’s something that has to build gradually over time,” Elise added.

“Yeah, I figured.”

I drank as I listened in to their conversation. Soldat looked serious as he discussed the situation with Elise and continued to consider the matter. “Well, let’s just drink up for now. Drink enough to knock you flat on your ass!”

At his encouragement, I took a seat.

“Pardon, sirs, but it’s about time for us to be closing.”

“Ahh, already that late, huh?”

“Mm...” I hummed back at Soldat.

As the two of us got to our feet, Elise wove her arm around mine. “Allow me to see you off.”

We paid our bill and headed out the door. At some point the darkness had started giving way to light as dawn began to break. It had been dawn when I returned to the city after rescuing Sara, as well. A bitter memory now.

“Urrgh... Ahh, we really chugged down that alcohol. A little too much...” Soldat said.

“Yeah...” I agreed with him.

We’d drunk a ton—gulped it down until we were wasted. Now my feet stumbled and the world spun around me. I didn’t know which way was forward. Down may as well been up, and I couldn’t tell right from left. Heh heh. I took advantage of my state to cop a feel of Elise’s ass.

“Hey, Rudeus,” Soldat said.

“Whaat?”

“Y’know, I... Well, when I’m in a labyrinth, I try not to rush things.”

“Mm.” I listened, even as I wondered what the heck he was talking about all of a sudden.

“See, the further you go into a labyrinth, the stronger the monsters you’re gonna find,” he explained. “Sometimes the bastards even team up with each other. If you panic and run in there blind, you’re just gonna get your ass handed to ya. So you take your time fighting monsters on the first few floors so you can get settled into your formation and get used to things. This is really effective, mmkay? ’Cause lots of those monsters crop up again on other floors.”

“...Yeah, effective! Got it!” So one should observe your opponent’s movements on the previous floors, grow accustomed to how they battled, and then move to the next, right? Yeah, that would be effective!

“What’s her name again, Sara? Don’tcha think you two took things way too fast?”

“Fast? Whaddya mean?” My words were slurring together.
“Yeah, I mean, I’m pretty quick in bed, but I dunno if you can really say the same about Sara.”

“That’s not what I mean.” He waved a hand dismissively.
“Sounded like she was ready for this, but you needed to take more time and mentally prepare yourself, ya know?”

“Nah,” I disagreed. “It was nothin’ to do with bein’ prepared. I toldja, didn’t I? She didn’t mean it like that. ’Twas obligation, that’s the only reason she’d sleep with me.”

“Nope. If ya ask me, that archer really did seem to have the hots for ya.”

Neither one of us could articulate our thoughts properly, but we were still somehow having this conversation. What was Soldat on about, though? Sara had the hots for me? So what, she only said what she said to hide her embarrassment? Hmm. In retrospect, it did sound a bit tsundere...

Nah, that couldn’t be it. If she really did have those kind of feelings for me, she wouldn’t have called me a disaster.

“Well, ya still got time, yeah? Meet her again, take it casually, and try talkin’ to her as if nothin’ ever happened. If that works, then bit by bit you can open up and let her in, yeah?”

“Yeah, I guess so...”

My mind, heavy with alcohol, began to churn in thought. He was right. I wouldn’t know for sure if I didn’t try talking to her. That was a lesson I’d learned from talking to him, in fact. Communication really was key to us humans.

“Very well,” I finally said. “I will make an attempt to engage with her, either this evening or dawn the next day.” I was pretty sure the members of Counter Arrow had mentioned leaving early this morning for a mission. Judging by how bright the sky was, they had probably left quite a while ago. Yeah...

Wait. Uh, wasn't I supposed to be going with them?

Oops. Looks like I was a no-show then.

"Well, I am afraid this is far as I am able to accompany you. Lord Rudeus, will you be all right?" Elise disentangled herself as we approached the exit to the pleasure district. The absence of her soft breasts and warmth left my body feeling lonely.

"Mm, yeah, I'll be just fine. I am...a magician! I can use Detoxification!" I declared.

"Are you really sure you'll be all right?"

"Mm, yup, fiiine. But, Elise, just one last time, can I touch your chest?"

She was quiet for a moment. "Yes, be my guest."

"Yeah, thanks!" I squished them in my hands just a wee bit. The buddy between my legs remained his droopy self, though. Yep, he was down there crouching. After all, you had to crouch in order to leap up high. He was just preparing for that.

Yeah, really. That was all it was. Crouching.

"Though I wasn't able to please you today, I hope you will come see me again." Elise planted a kiss on my cheek, retreated a few steps, and bowed before she left.

"Got it!" I answered, even though I knew I likely wouldn't be returning. Maybe if I managed to fix my problem. Maybe then the next time I got to feel those breasts, my buddy down below would actually spring to life.

I turned to Soldat. "Well, time to go home!"

"Yeah! Make sure you talk to her!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

My adventure in the pleasure district hadn't fixed anything, but it didn't feel like it'd been a waste of money. My time with Elise had

brought me some comfort, at least. Even if I didn't feel electricity race down my spine, I still got to enjoy the softness of her breasts.

"Do you *really* get it, though?" Soldat asked, doubtful. "Actually, today I'm gonna—" He stopped in his tracks partway through a sentence.

"Yeah, I get it!" I barked. "Sheesh, you really won't let it go. Even if it doesn't work, meh. I should be the one sayin' no thanks to a flat-chested chick like that. Women are only good if they're like Elise and have some bounce goin' on in the chest area!"

No reply.

"C'mon, Soldat, you agree, don't ya? I mean, us going shopping and eating together... How stupid. Like, are we playin' house here or what?"

"Uh, Quagmire, think you better leave it at that."

"Leave it at what? It's just a simple fact. Sara is a kid and Elise is a proper grown-up woman."

I finally glanced over at Soldat, wondering what it was he was trying to say. His eyes were fixed on something in front of him, and he wore an '*Oh shit*' look on his face.

I followed his gaze and I saw two women standing there. One was Suzanne, clad in her steel breastplate and gauntlets, looking ready to set off on an adventure. The other was Sara. She similarly looked prepared to set off, but her eyes were swollen and ringed with dark circles, almost as if she'd spent the night crying.

They were also looking at me, with shock and dismay on their faces. *Shit*, I thought as Sara came at me. Her steps were short, swift. "Sara, wait, that's not what I meant to say just now—"

My voice caught in my throat at the expression on her face. I swallowed back my words. Sara's gaze was cold as ice, as if she were

wearing a noh mask. Elise had quickly stepped away as she approached.

Slap!

A dry smack echoed through the quiet streets of the pleasure district. My head swiveled with the impact and my cheek burned where she struck me.

“You’re scum! Never show your face to me again!” I heard her say, my head still turned away. By the time I looked back, she was already racing over to Suzanne, who had an intense look on her face as well.

“That was unacceptable,” Suzanne said quietly, though it was loud enough for me to hear. She put a hand on Sara’s shoulder and the two left together.

I had no idea what had just happened. In a split second, I’d sobered completely. When I looked over at Soldat, he had his head tilted back with his palm pressed over his face.

There was one thing I did understand: I had just been rejected completely. There was no mistaking it. What I’d said was the alcohol talking, but that didn’t matter to Sara. She’d heard what I said and decided she never wanted to see me again.

As adventurers, we were bound to run into each other at the Adventurers’ Guild. I was sure she would look at me with disgust every time we did, now, and perhaps Suzanne would, too. Not just her, but Timothy and Patrice as well. Now, they would be the ones to regard me with the revulsion that Soldat once had.

I sank to my knees. I couldn’t stand. “Ah...aah...”

This was it. I couldn’t do it anymore. I’d spent a whole year with them and finally, *finally* started to become friends, but this was how it all ended. No more. “I should just die.”

I took a knife from my pocket and put it to the base of my neck.

Something instantly hit my wrist and I dropped the blade. Soldat had struck me with the side of his hand.

“Idiot, don’t be hasty! This was just a misunderstanding. Here you almost slept together, then she sees you coming out of the pleasure district with an escort and you talking shit about her. Of course she’s gonna get the wrong idea! Besides, the fact that they were still here means they must’ve been looking for you. Hurry up and run after them! Go explain things! You can still set it right. Well? Stop dicking around—stand up and get going!”

“None of that...even matters anymore. That’s it... It’s the end... I don’t want to do it anymore...!”

As I choked out a sob, Soldat slapped me on the shoulder. “Then why don’t you go home for now, instead? You don’t gotta work it all out with your mom and dad, but at least let them take care of you... Ah, wait, you said your mom is missing. Where was your dad again? The Asura Kingdom?”

“...Millis. The Holy Country of Millis, as part of the Fittoa Search and Rescue Squad.”

“Ah, then I guess that won’t work. That’s pretty far away.” Soldat scratched at the back of his head and hummed in thought.

Going home was certainly one option. After this bruising, I didn’t have the willpower to go on by myself anymore. It might be good to go back to where Paul was and spend my time looking after Norn and Aisha, together with Lilia. I couldn’t do anything by myself. I was mature enough, mentally speaking, but this was all I amounted to. No matter how much time went by, this was all I was capable of.

Even so, home was too far away. It would take at least a year to reach Millis from here. Paul and the others might move elsewhere by then. We might even miss each other. There was no way I could drag along this shattered heart of mine and keep living in the meantime.

It was hopeless.

“Well, how about coming with me?” Soldat blurted out, just as I began to despair.

“...Huh?”

“An enormous labyrinth was discovered in the Neris Dukedom. A couple parties within Thunderbolt got orders to go conquer it. That includes us, so we’re thinking about leaving today. You wanna tag along?”

I was confused. They were leaving today? So that meant he’d spent the night before their departure looking out for me?

“But I don’t want to enter anyone’s—”

“You don’t gotta join our party. I’m just asking if you wanna come with. If you’re that terrified of seeing those guys again, you can go somewhere else and find new people, yeah? There’s as many women out there as there are stars in the sky. Whaddya say?”

I slowly raised my head. Soldat was glancing down at me. As usual, his expression bordered on the edge of derision. The look in his eyes, however, was genuine.

“Why are you...willing to go this far for me?”

He shrugged. “No particular reason.”

“But I thought you hated me?”

“Yeah, that creepy smile of yours and that sickeningly polite speech like some kinda saint... That crap really rubbed me the wrong way. I wanted to get you to drop the mask. But now I know all about what’s going on with you. I get that you have valid reasons for acting the way you do. There’s no reason to hate you anymore.”

So that was it. Soldat really didn’t hate me anymore.

“I poked and prodded and just when I thought you’d blown up at me, you started sobbing like a child. I feel like I messed up, too. People have things they want to keep to themselves, y’know? I knew that, but I kept pushing you anyway.”

I felt like I'd really misunderstood Soldat. There had been more than one occasion when I found myself wondering how a functioning party could possibly have a leader like him, but he'd turned out to be a much better person than I'd imagined. Yeah, sure, he had his faults, too. In fact, his flaws were mostly what I'd been exposed to so far. But his party members could laugh those off because they were well aware of his good points, too.

"So, what'll it be?" Soldat asked as I mulled it over.

For now, I just wanted to get away from here. The thought of running into Sara because I'd hung around dragging my feet terrified me.

"I'll go. Please take me with you."

I knew this amounted to running away, but I wanted to be free of this place. Even if I went to a new land, I had no intention of looking for someone new. I'd had my fill of trying to get intimate with another person. I wanted to fix my problem if I could, of course, but I was dead sure that leaving Rosenberg wasn't going to do it. Whatever. It was fine. I'd gone without sex in my previous life. Giving up on it now wasn't going to kill me.

"Okay, well, let's be off then."

I gradually rose to my feet with Soldat's encouragement, looked at the rising sun, and swore to myself that never again would I rely on a single party.

Sara

Meanwhile, Sara was left feeling shocked and resentful after the encounter, harboring a fierce loathing for the one named Rudeus Greyrat. "I can't believe it. I just can't, I can't!" she shrieked.

It was just after noon. A substantial amount of time had passed since she'd slapped the boy. Currently, she was on the bank of a river about half a day's distance from Rosenburg. The party was escorting some fisherfolk, a C-ranked request that posed no danger. In other words, Sara had nothing to do. As a result, she'd spent her free time cursing Rudeus.

"I can't believe I—with that lowlife...! What scum! A complete and utter scumbag!"

She was frustrated. She had really liked him.

Of course, she couldn't stand him at first. But even when they did their first job together, she'd more or less understood that he wasn't a *bad* person. Her feelings for him went no further than that: he was just a cowardly noble boy, despite the enormous power he possessed.

That impression of him had only changed after what happened in the Galgau Ruins. He took up the rear and faced the horde of snow drakes without saying a word, just so the rest of them could escape. Rudeus was certainly strong enough to have outrun the creatures alone, but he'd prioritized getting Counter Arrow out alive. Back then, she didn't understand why he'd hidden his abilities, but she *did* realize he was the kind of person who'd sacrifice himself to save others.

From there, her feelings for him gradually began to change. Sara started to take an interest in what he said and did. She tried to dismiss her budding feelings, reminding herself that she hated adventurers who were born into nobility, or really that she just hated nobles as a whole. But the denial didn't stick, and somewhere in her heart she realized that Rudeus was different from the nobles she hated.

The mess in Trier Forest was the last straw in getting her to admit her true feelings. Or perhaps it was better to call it an

opportunity rather than a mess. At death's door in that forest, witnessing Rudeus coming to save her by himself, she finally acknowledged it wasn't hatred in her heart, but rather, affection. She'd fallen for Rudeus.

With that realization, Sara took an assertive approach. She started inviting him to their hangouts and actively engaging him in conversation. The more they talked, the more her affection for him grew. When she looked at him, she felt his blossoming affection for her. That was why she proposed a date and moved forward with the resolve to see it through to the end. Sara was too embarrassed to confess her feelings directly, so she planned to use her life debt to him as a pretext for bedding him. Then, she'd decided, she would reveal her true feelings once they'd slept together.

Which was why what followed came as such a shock.

His body didn't react to hers. Rudeus seemed like he cared about her, and even seemed receptive to her feelings for him, but apparently he felt no attraction to her body. It was a slap in the face.

If she'd had the wits to watch Rudeus' reaction more closely, she would have realized he was in shock, too—he hadn't intended this to happen, and he was just as anxious as her. Unfortunately, it was Sara's first time and she didn't have enough composure for that. It was all she could do to spit some words at him to save her pride and get out of there. She'd sobbed as she fled back to her inn, and continued to cry as she explained the situation to Suzanne. She spent the entire night in tears, but somehow resolved to put on a cheery front the next day.

But Rudeus wasn't at their meeting spot the next day. At his inn, the owner told them he'd left the previous night and not returned. Asking around, they learned that Soldat had dragged him off someplace.

Rudeus—and the whole of Counter Arrow, in fact—did not get along with Soldat. Maybe he and Soldat had gotten into it, and Soldat had dragged him off to hang him? As Sara fretted over the possibilities, she and Suzanne followed Rudeus' tracks. That was when they spotted him—at the entrance to the red-light district, kissing a red-haired escort.

Unbelievable. After Sara hadn't been able to satisfy him, he'd gone and had sex with a prostitute instead. Soldat stood nearby, and the two of them were very clearly hammered.

Then she heard what he said.

Based on everything she'd seen and heard, Sara came to this conclusion: Rudeus had spent the night with Soldat, bedding women and downing the same alcohol he refused to drink with her and the other members of Counter Arrow. He laughed as he recounted how utterly undesirable and unattractive her body had been. Her shock and devastation took over, keeping her from putting together the tell-tale clues that suggested otherwise. Her affection for him instantly turned inside-out into loathing.

If Sara had been a bit older, she might have been able to think about this calmly. Unfortunately, she was just a sixteen-year-old girl. Teenagers her age were certain that everything they saw and felt was fact. Besides, she had lived her whole life as an adventurer, and had no idea how to restrain the surge of emotion that resulted. She certainly didn't realize that she had a bad habit of lying to herself and ignoring the truth.

"Hey, Sara."

Suzanne was a bit more mature in that respect. She had seen Rudeus and Soldat too, but her impression of the encounter was slightly different. Now that her emotions had cooled, she realized there was something off about what Rudeus had said. The boy she saw that night was not the Rudeus she knew. Something had

happened. Suzanne had been in this sort of situation before, and she knew the danger in taking what you saw at face value.

On the other hand, it was possible Rudeus really had been dishonest with them. Which was why she opted to first comfort Sara, rather than act as a mediator.

“Do you think maybe we kind of misunderstood the situation?” Suzanne asked.

“What part did we misunderstand?!” Sara barked back at her. “After I—after we... And then he had the audacity to show up with some prostitute and start belittling me...”

“Think about it,” Suzanne urged her. “Could Rudeus really be such a despicable guy?”

“No duh, he just hid it from us this entire time! I was fooled—we all were! Who knows, maybe he was even in league with Stepped Leader back at the Galgau Ruins!”



“Oh boy...” Suzanne shrugged helplessly. She wasn’t well-versed in affairs of romance herself, so she didn’t have any good advice to offer. While she searched for words, Sara continued to brim with unfiltered resentment.

Timothy interjected, “What’s wrong? Isn’t it about time you guys tell me what happened too?”

“Sara, can I give him the non-specifics?”

Sara didn’t care that Timothy was the party leader—she had no interest in sharing the details of her situation. But knowing how it might impact the party’s mood, she weakly nodded at Suzanne.

“Okay, so what happened is...” Suzanne spoke in a whisper, relaying the events to Timothy. She did her utmost to keep it vague and remain as objective as possible.

After a few moments, Timothy suddenly looked up. “Soldat, huh? Perhaps you should ask that escort for the exact details of what happened, then.”

“But Soldat hates us,” Suzanne protested.

“The only one he hates is me. And Rudeus, but you saw them together. Maybe he was trying to help? The man has a bad attitude and talks trash, but I’ve heard rumors that he’s good at looking after people. If he really was rotten to the core, he wouldn’t be the leader of a veteran S-rank party like Stepped Leader. Besides, if Soldat really wanted to get at Sara, he wouldn’t go about it in such a roundabout manner. He’d have a man wait in her room or a back alleyway for her, or—”

“Timothy, we get it,” Suzanne cut in. “Enough.”

Sara lifted her head. She had to admit that Timothy had a point. She had been too caught up in self-pity to really observe her surroundings that night, but it had seemed like Rudeus was depressed, too. Maybe the way things played out had been beyond even his control.

“Let me ask him about it when we get home,” Suzanne offered.

“No, I’ll ask him myself,” Sara resolved. *And if it turns out I just jumped to conclusions, then I’ll apologize.*

However, by the time Sara returned to the town, Rudeus was nowhere to be found. He was neither at the Adventurers’ Guild nor at the inn.

“Quagmire? Dunno, haven’t seen him today.”

“Hmm.”

Unable to find him anywhere else, Sara ventured into the pleasure district. The businesses there were already beginning to open as night approached, but customers had yet to start arriving, so numbers on the streets were still thin. Sara began asking after Rudeus’ location. Perhaps she suspected, in the back of her mind, that he might return here tonight.

She went through several brothels, which were still preparing to open, before she spotted a certain woman.

“I-It’s you...” Sara gasped.

“Hm? Ohh.”

It was Elise. Sara didn’t know the woman’s name, just that she was a prostitute and that she’d witnessed her kissing Rudeus on the cheek that morning. “Hey, do you happen to know where Rudeus is?”

“No, afraid not. Perhaps the Adventurers’ Guild?” Elise frowned at the sudden visitor, not recognizing her.

“He wasn’t there. He came and saw you last night, didn’t he? Do you know anything?”

“Ah, you must be Sara.” That was enough for Elise to guess the identity of the girl before her. She glared unforgivingly at Sara, remembering why Rudeus—who’d helped a girl she considered a

younger sister—had come to her yesterday. And the expression on his face, and the emotions he'd struggled with as he went home. "What do you plan to do when you find him? Back him into a corner again?"

"Back him into a corner?" Sara echoed back, surprised. "I just wanted to ask him about yesterday."

"Very well. Then I will answer for you." Elise began recounting Rudeus' story, with every intention of laying the blame on Sara. Escorts were generally prohibited from disclosing details about their customers, but she felt like she had to share this.

"Impotence?" After listening to the whole thing, Sara tilted her head. She had never even heard of the concept before.

"It's an illness where men aren't able to get it up anymore. He's already greatly saddened and upset about the situation. What more do you plan to say to him?"

"No, I—"

Elise ignored her and continued, "If you didn't realize how hurt he was, then you're not ready to be his partner. Don't you think you should give him some space?"

"Yeah...I guess so."

Sara had nothing to say in her defense, so she took her leave. Once out of the pleasure district, she tottered down the road back to her inn, where Suzanne waited for her.

"Oh, welcome back, Sara. I just heard that Rudeus apparently left the town this morning. What do you want to do? Should we go after him?"

"...No."

Sara just continued to her room with a glum look on her face. She flopped onto her bed and reflected on what had happened. Now she was not only weighed down by her own pain, but by the

knowledge that Rudeus had been hurt as well. She continued to digest that fact well into the late hours, finally mumbling, “I would have at least liked to apologize.”

But she was too scared to pursue him. She feared he might not listen, feared he would push her away. Additionally, she realized that his leaving town without saying anything to them was also a sign of rejection.

A sob escaped her throat. In the end, Sara curled up in her bed like a turtle and didn’t move at all. When dawn broke and she finally drew herself out of bed, she was keenly aware of two things: that she had dark circles beneath her eyes, and that Rudeus had rejected her. She knew her love had ended, and as she watched the rising sun, she thought to herself: *But if it comes to pass that we meet again, I’d like to apologize. And be sincere about it.*



Epilogue

Accompanying Soldat, I spent about a year bouncing from town to town. We started at the third largest city of the Duchy of Neris; went to the capital, Gyuranza, where Thunderbolt's headquarters were located; and then to the city of Caerleon at the very edge of the Ranoa Kingdom.

As we moved throughout the Three Magic Nations, I began working on my own, independent of Soldat. I was basically doing the same stuff I did back in Rosenberg: joining adventurers on a temporary basis to get my name out there. I didn't think I'd have as much leeway to bend the rules here as I'd had in Rosenberg, so I only participated in B- to S-ranked missions. I would help Soldat and his party with missions, too. We moved quickly from town to town, switching locations every two to three months.

The members of Stepped Leader never treated me like a nuisance. In fact, it was just the opposite: They welcomed me, albeit with expressions that seemed to say *Oh boy, what has Soldat dragged in this time?* Several of them had been brought into the fold by Soldat under similar circumstances. They understood my objective and maintained a respectable distance.

I had no idea what had happened to the members of Counter Arrow. I hadn't heard anything about them since that day. Maybe they found some new members, or maybe the jobs got too tough and they decided to return to the Asura Kingdom. Honestly, now that things had calmed down, I wished I'd tried talking to Sara again.

Ultimately, though, this was probably for the best. My relationship with Sara and the other members of Counter Arrow had not been part of my original objective, and diddling around in Rosenberg kept me from moving on. I had some lingering regrets

about not saying anything to them before I left the city, but it wasn't worth the stress of reconciliation, either.

I was searching for Zenith. That was the only thing I needed to focus on. This wasn't the time to be mulling over women like Eris or Sara. I could worry about such things after I found Zenith.

That thought alone took a weight off my chest. A relationship with a woman was completely unnecessary right now, and since it was unnecessary, I had no need to cling to regrets.

These days, if a female adventurer or someone I was helping during a mission made a pass at me, I would gracefully sidestep their advances. Painful as it was, the incident with Sara had taught me something. The past version of myself would have danced on air at every woman's approach and invited them to the bedroom, positive that this time would be different, only for my hopes to be repeatedly shattered as my little man hung limp. Granted, I would be thrilled if my buddy suddenly sprang to life once more, but it was pretty far down my list of priorities.

Still, I would occasionally recall my first time with Eris, or Sara's soft, supple body, or the way Elise had tried to please me. I resolved to find a cure for my impotence as soon as Zenith was found.

Meanwhile, as I'd hoped, my name became known throughout the Three Magic Nations. Not quite on the same scale as in Rosenberg, where even the escorts knew of me, but I was famous enough that people knew I was searching for someone.

East of the Three Magic Nations, in one of the many small countries spread out over the Northern Territories, two men were talking in an Adventurers' Guild.

“This country will be done for soon.”

“How can you tell?”

“People’s faces. No one has any spirit left in them. Plus, there’s a rumor that the Prime Minister’s eager to go to war. When a country is backed into a corner and war is their only option, you can tell how things are going to end.”

“Aah... Well, I don’t want to get dragged into that mess. Maybe I should move on.”

“Gonna have to go to the west then.”

“Yeah, I left the Three Magic Nations to see what things were like, but it’s just madness out here.”

Aside from the two adventurers, the only occupants of the otherwise deserted guild were a group of gloomy-faced adventurers and a woman who was asking the receptionist something. Even the bulletin board was largely devoid of requests. The residents were impoverished, and so entrenched in their problems that they couldn’t even ask for assistance. Visiting adventurers were few and far between, so even requests that did pop up went largely ignored. This Adventurers’ Guild was in a real slump.

This country had been different long ago. Back when it was first established, it was a prominent and powerful nation among the Northern Territories. People were sure that it would conquer the whole of the northern region.

Fate, it turned out, had different plans.

Making a living in the north proved to be an incredibly difficult task. Cultivable crops were few, monsters were numerous, and travelers rarely passed through. If this country had worked to develop magic as the Three Magic Nations did, it might have done better; but alas, it produced nothing. All it did was consume what resources it had until there was nothing left to consume.

Now, the nation was well on the path to destruction. It was only a matter of time until one of its neighbors declared war on it, or it declared war on them. Either way, those in charge would be replaced. That might breathe life back into the Adventurers' Guild, but before that could come to pass, any adventurers who remained would be caught in the middle of war. Anyone with good sense would flee before the borders were sealed, which was exactly what the two aforementioned men were talking about.

"Speaking of the Three Magic Nations, I've heard a strange rumor."

"A strange rumor?"

"People were talking about this ridiculously strong magician who's been temporarily joining other adventuring parties."

"There's nothing strange about that. There's a bunch of guys who do that to make some coin."

"Yeah, that's just it, though. This guy isn't even looking to make money. I don't know what he's after, but they say he basically hasn't taken any cash."

"So? That just means he's too useless to get a cut of things, right?"

"No, that's not it, either. I heard he's unbelievably strong."

"Unbelievably?"

"Yeah. Just by having that one guy in their ranks, a group of twenty took down a Red Wurm Straggler."

"...Seriously?"

"Yeah. Strange, isn't it? Someone like that wandering around as an adventurer... You'd have thought some country would have welcomed him into their service by now."

"That can't be right. What's this guy called?"

"Uhh, if I remember right... It was Quagmire Rudeus."

“Quagmire, huh? What a stupid name.”

Just then, a shadow fell over their table. The man glanced up and found the refined-looking woman—who moments ago had been conversing with the receptionist at the counter—had wandered over to their side. She was an elf. The men could immediately tell that she was a first-rate warrior. She was slender but muscular, with a demeanor that suggested she’d been through many a battle. They gulped.

But something was off. There was a luster to her that seemed unbecoming of a warrior.

“Could you share that story with me in a bit more detail?” The woman put a finger to her lips, her expression almost flirtatious as she asked the question.

“Th-the one we were just talking about?”

“Yes, the one about that adventurer, Quagmire Rudeus.”

“I don’t know all that much,” the man blurted incoherently. Right now, he wasn’t sure if she was asking him a question or soliciting him.

“Isn’t there anything you can remember? For instance, where he might have last been spotted, or anything like that?”

“Ah, uh, I think...”

“Yes, come on, try your best. If you can remember, I’ll let you have your way with me.”

A switch flipped in the man’s head. Men were simple creatures: As soon as he realized she was not asking him a question, but rather propositioning him, his mind started working overtime to get what he desired. In a corner of his mind, he found himself thinking this had to be too good to be true, but he could not resist the delicious prospect dangled before him. “Oh, I remember! Basherant. It was the third largest city in Basherant, Pipin.”

“My, my, is that so? Thank you.” The woman grinned at him. Then, she muttered under her breath, “So I’ve finally found you.”

The man didn’t catch that last part. But she did grab him by the hand, as if to say she was ready to offer him a reward for his efforts.

“Well then, let us be on our way,” she announced.

“T-to Pipin?” he asked in disbelief.

“Of course not. I have to pay you for your information. We’re off to your room. Unless you prefer doing it outside?”

“Heh, heh... What kind of pervert are you?”

“You as well, sir. Come along.”

The two men took her to their inn. No—perhaps it would be more accurate to say that *she* took *them*. After all, she was the one most bent on having sex.

The men, for their part, would spend some time wondering if the events of that day been a dream. Unable to forget the night they spent with her, they would linger in that country, searching until war was upon them.

That, however, is a tale for a different time.

“Just a bit further.”

Her skin looked lustrous the next morning as she set out for Basherant’s third largest city, Pipin. The woman’s name was Elinalise Dragonroad and she had only one objective: to tell Rudeus Greyrat that his mother had been found.

Extra Chapter: The Ruler of the Ranoa University of Magic

Among the Three Magic Nations, the Ranoa Kingdom in particular was famous for its magical education, having produced a number of exceptional magicians. A hundred years prior, as the leader of the alliance between the Three Nations, Ranoa had established the Magic City of Sharia.

Three prestigious organizations, one from each country, were based in this city: the Duchy of Neris' Magical Implements Workshop, the Duchy of Basherant's Magician's Guild, and finally Ranoa's University of Magic.

The university was the most famous of the three. There were tales told about its attendees, who included the court magicians of the Three Nations, the faculty of magical academies in Asura Kingdom, and some adventurers who had left their mark on the world. There were even songs about adventurers like Roxy Migurdia, an alumnus of the university. Currently, its student body numbered over ten thousand, and this distinguished mammoth of a school offered a varied curriculum that went beyond just magic.

A certain student had enrolled herself at this prestigious institution—one named Ariel Anemoi Asura.

"Ah, President Ariel! Good morning!"

"Good morning!"

It was a bright spring morning. Voices echoed along the tree-lined paths that extended from the student dorms to the main building.

“Miss Sarria, Miss Misha, good day to you.” The woman who responded to the greetings was a charismatic beauty with silky blonde hair, glowing bright enough to turn every head as she walked. “Oh?” She suddenly turned with a smile and an outstretched hand. “Miss Sarria, your collar needs straightening.”

“Huh? Oh...”

“There, it’s fixed. You’re beautiful, so you simply must pay attention to your appearance.”

“O-oh, yes!” The younger girl’s cheeks reddened.

Ariel nodded in satisfaction. “Have a wonderful day, ladies,” she said, and continued down the walkway.

The girl left in her wake spent a few moments dumbfounded before turning to her friend, bouncing with excitement. “President Ariel touched me!! She said I was beautiful! Beautiful!!”

“That’s so amazing! Seriously!”

Ariel listened to the pleasant sound of their boisterous squeals as she continued on her way to the school. People erupted into murmurs as they spotted her.

“Look, it’s President Ariel! She always looks so beautiful.”

“Maybe I should try talking to her...”

“Idiot, like she’d ever give you the time of day.”

Men and women alike exclaimed their admiration when they saw her. Even though they all wore the same uniform, Ariel still shone like a light in the dark.

“Look, it’s Master Luke and Master Fitz!”

“They’re so dreamy...”

“Looking at the three of them together, it’s almost like a painting come to life!”

It wasn’t just Ariel who drew attention—the two protectors shadowing her were targets of envy, as well. One was the handsome Luke Greyrat, with his vibrant brown hair slicked back. The other was the young boy Fitz, with his short-cropped white hair and thick sunglasses. Both of them—the dreamy knight and pretty boy—served the most beautiful woman in the school. The sight of them was enough to excite the other students’ imaginations, fostering the idea that these three individuals existed on some higher dimension than the rest.

“Hey, have you heard? Lady Ariel is looking for exceptional people.”

“What for?”

“To be her trusted retainers when she returns to her kingdom. At least, that’s what I heard.”

“Seriously? Amazing. Can I volunteer myself?”

“With your grades? As if.”

“Yeah, better keeping working at it!”

Those three envied individuals were the center of the school’s attention. Bathed in the warm spring sunlight, they looked even more gorgeous than they had in winter. Everyone believed, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they had a dazzling future ahead of them.

Why were they so beloved by the students? Was it because of their looks? Their impressive skills? Those were contributing factors, of course, but not the real reason.

To understand how Ariel established herself in her current position, we will have to go back several years.

Several years prior, Ariel Anemoi Asura had lost the political battle in the Asura Kingdom and fled the country. Some theorized she'd died in the process, but while it was true that she was pursued by assassins, she somehow managed to escape to the Ranoa Kingdom. Ariel received protection from the kingdom and then, as she originally intended, successfully enrolled in the University of Magic.

Of course, she hadn't given up on regaining power in the Asura Kingdom. Ariel knew she must return as soon as possible, for the sake of Pilemon Notos Greyrat, who still supported her from within the kingdom. But it was clear that history would just repeat itself if she returned as she was now, and so the princess concocted the idea of scouting for exceptional talent at Ranoa's university in order to send them back to Asura ahead of her. To accomplish this objective, Ariel decided to strengthen her influence at the school.

The student council at the university possessed neither complete autonomy nor strong authority, but it was seen as the pinnacle of a school attended by ten thousand students, and highly influential among those students. Ariel, who was looking to recruit talent before it even began to bloom, found the organization exceptionally useful. Intent on her objective and already supremely talented, Ariel distinguished herself quickly, and her request to join the student council was approved despite the fact that she was a mere first-year.

After a few months had passed and Ariel was certain she had a solid foundation to work from, she gathered all of her attendants in her room for a strategy meeting. "We were able to enter the student council, but we mustn't grow complacent. This is merely the first step."

"Understood."

Nearly twenty of her attendants had been killed on the road by assassins, so their number had dwindled. Now she had just four: Luke Notos Greyrat, Ellemoi Bluewolf, Cleane Elrond, and Fitz.

“All we have to do is utilize the student council’s reputation to recruit good people,” said Fitz.

“That won’t be enough.” Ariel shook her head. “Before this is over, I’d like to have the support of both the leaders of this country and the Magician’s Guild.” Ranoa Kingdom’s leaders and the Magician’s Guild were both hugely influential in Asura, whose own teachings in magic came from Ranoa itself. “Granted, we’ll have to impress them if we want their aid in this political power struggle.”

“Impress them... Like with money?”

“No, with power.” Ariel giggled as Fitz tilted his head. “I am trying to become the ruler of the Asura Kingdom. Just being a member of the student council won’t convince them to support my cause. I must become someone who *moves* the council. In other words, I have to become the president.”

She continued, “The vice president graduates next year, and the president the year after that. Thus, I plan to aim first for the position of vice president, and then for that of president.”

“Yes, I think that’s a good idea. Those of like mind and exceptional ability will surely flock to someone of your caliber. And it is those very people that we seek,” Luke said approvingly. The other three nodded.

It had been six months since they’d first enrolled, and they still had yet to recruit any allies. The only things Ariel had at her disposal were her natural-born charisma, the fact that she’d been accepted into the student council as a first-year, and the adoration of the other students. There were exceptional individuals who had caught her eye, but she had yet to reach a level where she could win their favor, unveil the full truth of her situation, and convince them to

fight alongside her in the Asura Kingdom. The way she would prefer it—indeed, the way things should really be—was for them to approach her first.

“If the natural order of things is for you to become president, then you should ideally win the vote by an overwhelming majority,” Ellemoi said, her hand pressed to her chin.

The sitting president was in charge of selecting and appointing appropriate candidates to the council. When a president retired, all remaining members became candidates for the position, and the president would be determined by a school-wide vote. Such was the rule established by the first principal of the school, a tradition that had continued ever since.

Even so, Ariel was a mere first-year student. Next year, the current vice president would likely ascend to the presidency. Once they graduated and an election was conducted, the other current members—all in their sixth and seventh years by then, with numerous accomplishments of their own—would doubtless stand in her way. Even if she could beat them, it would likely be by a narrow margin. Granted, becoming student council president as a third-year student would still be an impressive feat. But it wouldn’t be *exceptional* unless she also dominated the vote in a landslide victory.

Such was the path forward that Ariel envisioned. You might even call it an essential prerequisite for her future. If she couldn’t accomplish even this much, then returning to the Asura Kingdom would remain nothing more than a dream within a dream.

In fact, she might need to aim even higher.

“It may be necessary for you to take the presidency next year,” murmured Fitz. The white-haired boy had a grim look on his face and his arms were folded over his chest.

“Oh my, you say some terrifying things, Fitz. Are you proposing we outmaneuver the current vice president?”

Although Ariel was a first-year student, there was no doubt that she had four exceptional subordinates; charisma that had earned her great adoration among the first-years; and practical skills, to boot. And so, she had a cut a deal with the current vice president: She would endorse them for the position of president in the next election, and in return, they would appoint her to their former position. This meant giving up her chance at the presidency this year, but if she were diligent in planting seeds during her second year, then she could be fairly confident of reaping the results in her third.

“That plan is good, certainly, but shouldn’t we attempt something even *more* impressive?”

Fitz was absolutely right. If you unraveled the threads of the university’s long history, you wouldn’t find a *single* soul who had risen to the rank of president in their second year. The only exception was the first president of the student council, but that didn’t count, since there were only first-years in attendance at the time. Plus, if Ariel were to defeat the person who was a shoo-in for the presidency in a landslide, they would be talking about it in the city of Sharia. Word of her accomplishment might even reach the leaders of the Three Magic Nations.

One might think of the university as a simple school, but there were many alumni who went on to become leaders of the Three Nations and the Magicians’ Guild. If something extraordinary happened in the university for the first time since it was founded, there was good chance it would come to their attention.

“True. But we won’t be able to defeat the vice president without a plan.”

“Well, about that... I actually do have a really good plan.”

“Let’s hear it.” Though caught off guard by Fitz’s proposal, Ariel shifted in her seat and listened closely.

“Um...well, Princess, you know how you’ve been the target of some harassment lately?”

“Indeed.”

It had started just after she joined the student council. There were several incidents in succession: people spitting in front of her as she walked, people bumping shoulders with her, people purposefully hitting her with a water ball during magic practice. They were passed off as coincidences, but Ariel knew that they were intentional. After all, they had gradually escalated in severity. The worst was when some of her underwear, which she had hung out to dry at night, was stolen and dumped in front of the boys’ dormitory. That had indisputably been a step too far, and she’d asked Fitz and Ellemoi to look into the matter. As a result of which...

“I discovered the masterminds,” Fitz announced. “Linia and Pursena.”

“So it was those two after all.”

They were the descendants of the leaders of the Doldia Tribe, which reigned sovereign among the beastfolk. The two girls had travelled halfway across the world from the Great Forest. As members of the Doldia Tribe, they’d had a pampered upbringing, and let their magical talent go to their heads. The lenient environment at the school only worsened their attitudes, and the two became complete delinquents, feared by the entirety of the student body. With their entourage of twenty-plus fierce-looking beastfolk in tow, people cleared the way wherever they went. If you so much as made eye contact, their whole gang would pile on you.

The school administrators were troubled by their inappropriate conduct, but the girls were essentially princesses of the Doldia Tribe. Reprimanding them ran the risk of making enemies of all beastfolk attending the university—and the beastfolk were quite numerous here, if still a minority compared to the humans. And so the school

had yet to step in, and many a student cried themselves to sleep at night.

“What does that have to do with your plan?”

“We crush them.” Fitz closed his hand into a fist. “The students are terrified of those bullies. If we put a stop to them, everyone will be on your side, Princess.”

A fire burned in Fitz’s eyes. What they had done was unforgivable. Fitz respected and adored Ariel, and they had taken her underwear and dropped in front of the boys’ dorm, of all places, with the nerve to add a note saying: *This underwear belongs to the Asuran Princess*. Since then, many of the male beastfolk had watched Ariel with hungry looks. Presumably the princess was unfazed by this, but Fitz couldn’t stand it.

“If we start trouble with them in school, it will be our reputation that plummets,” Ariel said.

“If we can provoke them into attacking us first, it will be legitimate self-defense. The school would back us up in such a scenario. Plus, if that’s what we’re up against, I’m pretty sure I can handle it by myself.”

Ariel briefly considered his words, then glanced at the faces of those present. Whenever she felt unsure, she sought the opinions of her other attendants.

“I think it’s a good idea. What they did was unforgivable. If it comes down to a fight, I’ll jump in.”

“I can’t offer much, but I will help where I can.”

“Agreed.”

Their words were reassuring, and Ariel offered them an encouraging smile in return. “Very well, then. While I am sure what we’re about to attempt is risky, since you all agree, let’s give it a go.”

And thus, the mission to crown Ariel as the student council president was underway.

The plan was put into motion out about a week later.

It was noon, and all the students were moving to the school cafeteria. Linia had her hands shoved in her pockets and Pursena had something that resembled a cigarette protruding from her mouth. Their uniforms looked sloppy, their postures terrible. They looked the part of delinquent so well that if Rudeus had seen them, he would have hugged the wall and kept his head down to avoid meeting their eyes. Such bullies existed even in this world.

The beast girls strutted at the head of their pack as if they owned the place. In comparison, Ariel's group was only three people strong: Ariel, Luke and Fitz. They made it look like they'd encountered Linia and Pursena in front of the cafeteria by chance.

At first, Linia and Ariel exchanged looks that demanded that the other person make way, but it was Ariel who finally feigned indifference and stepped aside. The beastfolk let forth a snicker as they watched.

"How pathetic."

"Some 'princess.' Hmph."

"Oh yeah, wasn't that her underwear lying in front of the dorm recently?"

"She's trying to hook men that way, right? Humans mate for their entire lives, after all."

They cackled.

"Enough, mew," said Linia.

“Yeah, you’re making me feel sorry for her,” agreed Pursena.

The two looked smug as they delivered those reprimands and headed into the cafeteria. It felt good to ridicule the privileged. It felt even better to put a stop to it, thereby gaining the moral high ground. There was nothing Ariel could do about it, either. After all, Linia and Pursena had twenty beastfolk in tow. Most of them were half human, and they’d never been in a proper fight before. But there was strength in numbers, which they used to mock the widely popular princess of a large country.

“Parading around with twenty men in tow, like some kind of herd. It seems the Doldia are really no better than animals,” Ariel murmured. Her voice was barely above a whisper. Her lips had barely even moved, so none of the other students could hear her.

“Hey, what did you just say?”

However, beastfolk had far better hearing than the humans and could pick up even the quietest of sounds. Thus, Linia and Pursena had caught that faint utterance. The rest of their band didn’t have quite as advanced hearing, but several of them heard it, too.

“I don’t believe I said anything?” Ariel replied innocently.

“No, I’m sure I heard it, mew. You were trash-talking us, mew. Weren’t they, Pursena?”

“Seriously. Fuck them.”

Linia’s fur was puffed up and Pursena had spit out whatever she’d had in her mouth. A chicken bone, as it turned out. Pursena was so gluttonous that she constantly snacked between meals. Once they were certain that Ariel was picking a fight, they marched right up to her and stared her down.

“Well? Go on, try saying that to us again, mew. This time, do it to our faces.”

“Or you can prostrate yourself,” offered Pursena. “Get on your back and show us your belly.”

“I already told you, I didn’t say anything.” Ariel spoke with confidence, even as the two threatened her. To an outside observer, it looked like Linia and Pursena were antagonizing Ariel without cause.

Linia narrowed her eyes. “Don’t tell me you’re a chicken, mew?”

“Chicken? I eat chicken,” growled Pursena.

“What on earth is this about...?” Ariel, on the other hand, seemed entirely unaffected. She looked every bit as bold as a king.

And then, barely audible, she said: “Once this year’s mating season is over, you’ll be having the children of men whose names you don’t even know. Just like mutts on the street.”

No one could see Ariel’s lips move. As Asuran nobility, she had been trained to speak without detection. Therefore, her whisper was only loud enough for Linia and Pursena, who were in close range, to pick up.

“You bitch! You have some nerve. Fine, we’ll fight you, mew!”

“We’ll beat the crap outta you, strip you naked, and dump water all over you!”

From the sidelines, it looked like Linia and Pursena had suddenly lost their tempers because they didn’t like Ariel’s attitude. In fact, no one doubted that was what it was. The beast girls often had exactly this reaction when they thought someone was being too cocky with them.

And as soon as they jumped into action, their twenty lackeys followed.

“You’ll be seeing stars soon!”

“Say your prayers!”

“We’ll pound you into the ground!”

The swarm of them flew forward, arms reaching for Ariel. They wouldn't reach her.

"Gwah!"

"Gah!"

Before they realized what was happening, they'd been sent flying back through the air. In a split second, they were scattered and tumbling across the floor. Linia and Pursena instantly leaped back to their feet, scanning their surroundings.

"W-what was that, mew?!"

"It's Fitz! That little minion of Ariel's did something...!"

Fitz—the white-haired boy that always stood behind Ariel with a look of indifference—was in front of the princess. As soon as the beastfolk moved, he'd stepped in front of her and used his silent casting to create a shockwave that blasted them back.

The only one who'd moved forward was Fitz. Ariel maintained her prim and proper posture, and although Luke's hand rested on the hilt of his blade, he didn't move. Fitz stood completely alone. And yet, he looked confident that he could handle them.

Fitz said nothing; he rarely ever spoke. Only a few students had ever heard his voice.

Now that he stood in their way, Linia and Pursena made him their target.

"Hyaah!"

"Grrrr!"

The twenty beastfolk fell on Fitz like a wave.

Fitz remained silent. His body didn't even move—just his hands. Each time they did, a fiery explosion happened, or an icy object shot from the ground. These attacks relentlessly pummeled the beastfolk, and in seconds, all twenty of them were sent tumbling through the air. They squealed like puppies as they were blasted with Fitz's

magic, either knocked unconscious or scrambling to retreat. Twenty opponents were a lot, but they were all unaccustomed to fighting, scarcely attended class, and primarily relied on violence in numbers to maintain their threatening appearance.

“I’m gonna tear you to pieces, mew!”

“Fuck yeah, we will!”

Only Linia and Pursena were different. Their fighting spirits weren’t dampened, not even as they witnessed Fitz’s magic for themselves. In fact, they dodged each spell with great agility. Linia then charged forward while Pursena put her hand to her lips.

“Awooooo!”

They had unique vocal cords that could make sounds infused with magic to instantly paralyze their opponent. This type of magic was inherent to the beastfolk.

A tendril of blood trickled from Fitz’s nose, and his upper body slumped forward. Once Linia was sure he’d been hit, she slashed her claws toward his face. “Hyah!”

One of them would use vocal magic to seal the enemy’s movement while the other went in for the kill. That was Linia and Pursena’s strategy for victory.

However, in the next moment, Fitz made a baffling move. He lifted his hands and slapped his ears. Blood burst forth.

At the same time, Linia charged in. “I got you, mew!” Her claws slashed forward, but just as she was certain she’d hit her target, Fitz sank downwards. Linia caught a few strands of his hair, but now he had slipped right in past her defenses.

“Urgh...!”

His fist shot into the pit of her stomach, emitting a shockwave that sent her flying through the air like shrapnel from an explosion.

“Wh-why?!” gasped Pursena.

Fitz didn't miss a beat. He headed right for Pursena, who was visibly shaken by the fact that her vocal magic hadn't hit its mark. She frantically tried to brace herself, but it was already too late. "Ha!" He sent her airborne with an invisible wave from his outstretched fist. She slammed against the wall of the cafeteria and lost consciousness.

"Ack...cough..."

Fitz came and stood in front of Linia, who was gasping for air. The boy had carried out his wrath in silence this entire time. Linia was in shock as he towered over her. She glanced at her surroundings, but not a single person from their group remained standing. Even her reliable partner was sprawled helplessly on the ground with her legs spread wide open, completely unconscious.

Linia realized that their group had been decimated and lost the will to fight. "Y-you win, mew."

Even as Linia conceded defeat, Fitz remained eerily quiet. His eyes were hidden behind sunglasses, but the anger was still there, a true killing intent that couldn't be satisfied by this joke of a fight. Fitz knew exactly what they had done—that they'd thrown water on Ariel, stolen her underwear and discarded it.

Linia might have her pride, but she didn't value it more than her life. "W-we're sorry, mew. We'll apologize for the underwear incident too. I'll even do this, mew." Linia had no choice but to take a submissive posture, exposing her stomach in repentance. It was the most humiliating move for beastfolk.

Fitz smashed a ball of water over both Linia, who was prostrating herself, and Pursena, who was lying unconscious a short distance away. There was little attack power behind it, but it was the equivalent of having a bucket upended on them. Both beastgirls were drenched, looking quite pitiful with their fur flattened against their skin.

“If you’ve truly learned your lesson, never raise your hand against Princess Ariel again.”

Fitz left them with those words. He rarely ever said anything. It was the first time that Linia, Pursena, and the rest of the students in the cafeteria—indeed, any of them, save for Ariel and Luke—had heard him speak. His voice was high, almost feminine.

“Y-yes, understood.” Linia nodded, her face bright red with shame.

“Fitz, well done. Let’s be on our way.” Ariel offered him a quick smile when he returned, and their group departed as if nothing had ever happened. Only Linia and Pursena were left in their wake, looking like a couple of drowned rats. They soon retreated, unable to withstand the attention that was now focused on them.

All the students who had witnessed this spontaneously broke into applause. That was the moment when the delinquents who acted like they ruled the school were defeated.

After that, courtesy of Ellemoi and Cleane’s work, rumor spread that it was, in fact, Linia and Pursena who had sent their minions to beat up Ariel. The majority of the beastfolk involved were expelled in the incident’s aftermath.

And that was how Ariel secured her current position. By driving the delinquents out of the school and bringing peace back to the campus, she earned the gratitude of the students, who then voted for her in the following election. She became the student council president in her second year, and many regarded her with strong admiration.

That situation, of course, didn't sit well with the vice president. They spent their remaining year making snide comments, but they hadn't the courage to face Fitz—the very man who had taken on the indomitable Linia and Pursena all by himself—and graduated quietly.

As for the humiliated party of two...

"Urgh."

"Fuck."

Somehow, they'd managed to avoid expulsion. Their behavior wasn't entirely improved, and they were still hostile toward Ariel, but they were attending classes more seriously. They would hiss and bark like sore losers whenever they laid eyes on her, even as they tucked their tails between their legs and made way for her to pass.

"Hmph! We won't forget what you did to us, mew!"

"Pft! Better not go out at night!"

Ariel said nothing. She just giggled.

This only increased the admiration directed at Ariel and her two bodyguards. There was no one left at the school who could stand up to the princess.

That same princess was now a third-year student. Just as she'd planned, becoming the student council president in her second year allowed her to make contact with both the Magicians' Guild and the rulers of Ranoa Kingdom. Those of like mind flocked to the student council, and Ariel picked the most exceptional and trustworthy to go to the Asura Kingdom and proceed with her plans. What she considered her vanguard would be leaving for the kingdom the following year.

Everything had gone surprisingly well in this past year since she became the president. Today they were conducting another one of their strategy meetings, though they had transitioned from her personal suite to the student council room. “Now then, Cleane, are there any promising candidates among the first-years this year?” she asked.

“There are. Zanoba Shirone and Cliff Grimor, in particular. The former is a Blessed Child, while the latter was able to perform Advanced-tier magic even before he enrolled.”

“Very well. Let’s look for opportunities to gradually engage them. Are there any others who stand out?”

“Among the first-years? No, I don’t believe so.” Cleane shook her head. “However, there may be some who will show promise in the future.”

“I still require many more pieces for my chess board. Perhaps we should look at reaching out to those outside of the school.”

As Ariel agonized over what to do, Ellemoi looked up. “Princess, I suspected you would say as much. I have already located some particularly impressive individuals beyond the walls of the university.”

“I expected no less. Let me see what information you have on them.”

“Yes, Princess.” Ellemoi pulled out a sheaf of papers from one of the cabinets in the student council room and handed them over. “I would propose selecting some of these, inviting them to the school, and then assessing their character before approaching them to join us. What do you think?”

“That sounds good. Please go ahead and begin the selection process. As for inviting them... We can ask Vice Principal Jenius for aid with that, I’m sure.”

“Yes, Princess.”

Fitz and Luke began to scan the list at Ariel's bidding. There were several different individuals on the list: from those already living in the Magic City of Sharia; to active adventurers across the Three Nations; and even the protector of the Sword Sanctum, the Sword God Gal Farion himself.

It was as Fitz studied that list that he suddenly gasped. His hand stopped when he spotted a name he recognized. His eyes went wide and his lips pursed shut. His trembling hand tightened against the paper, creasing it.

"Fitz, did someone on there catch your eye?"

The boy gave a sharp nod. His expression was a mix of surprise, bewilderment, and delight.

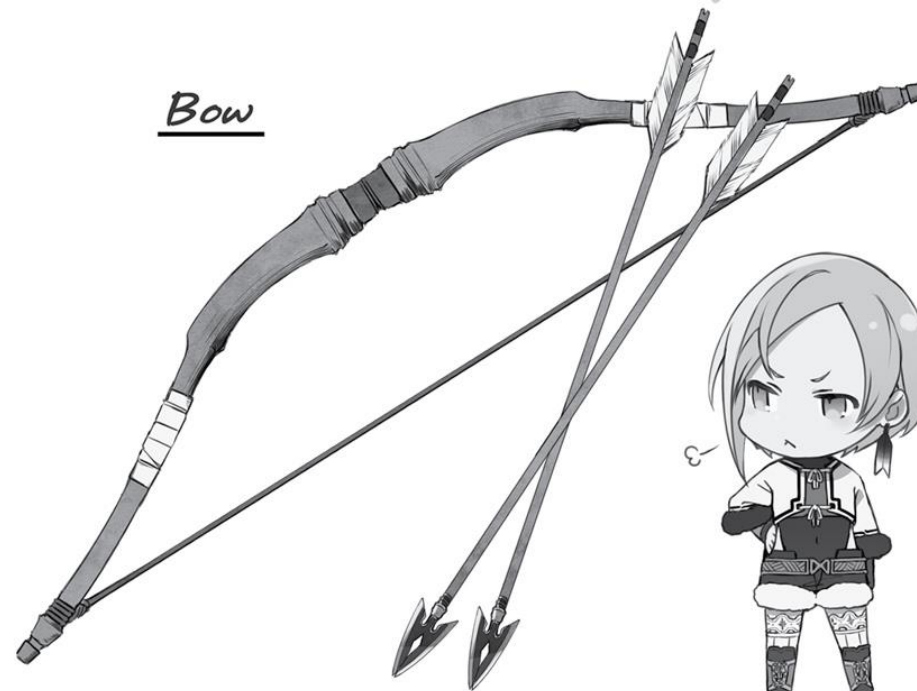
"Princess Ariel... I know this person."

The paper in his hand had the name *Rudeus Greyrat* written on it.

Sara



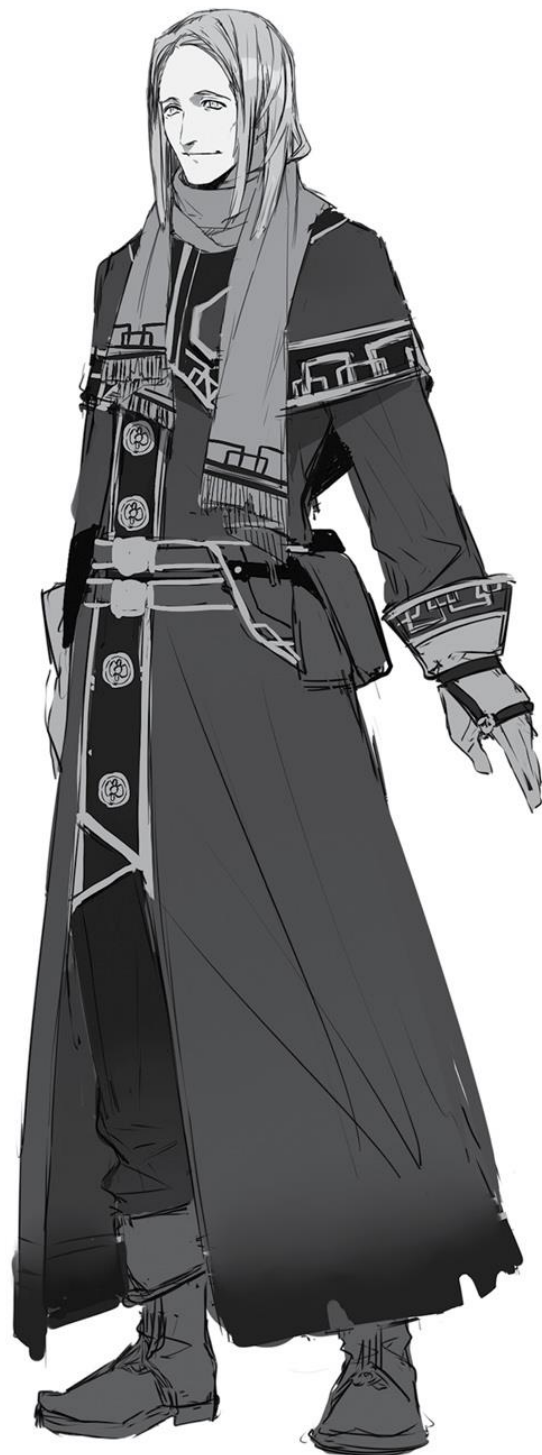
Bow



CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

Sara

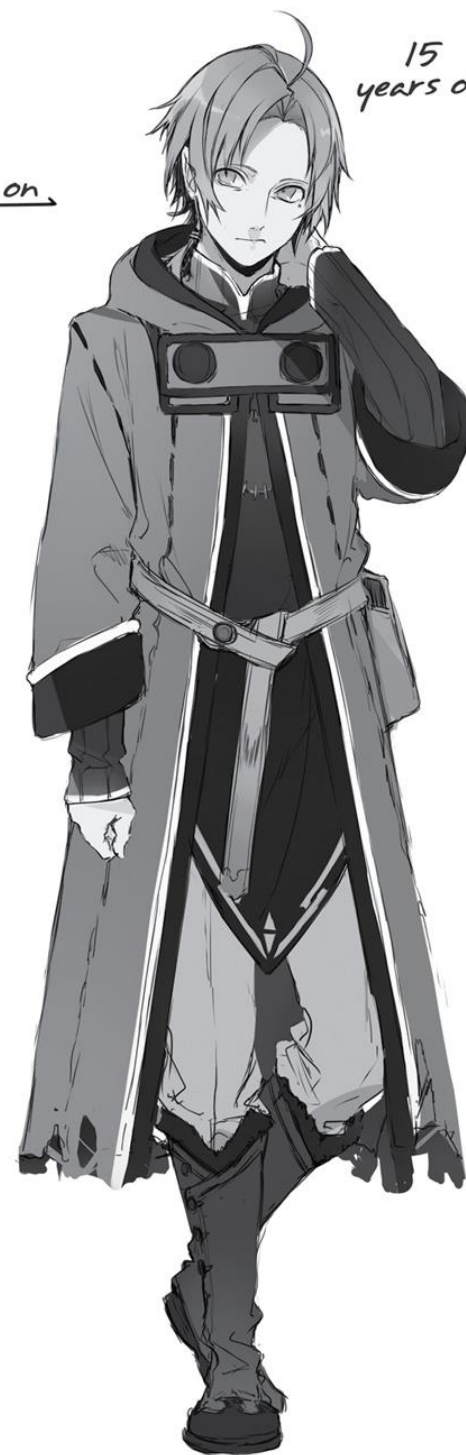
Staff



Robe off



Robe on



15
years old



Soldat



Suzanne



CHARACTER DESIGN CONCEPT

**Soldat &
Suzanne**

Mimir



Staff

Patrice



About the Author: Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Become Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, and became number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within the first year of publishing. "Running can be an acceptable solution when life is truly agonizing," stated the author very seriously.



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